All Our Words Are Wrong… But Can Anything Be Done About It?

Dylan Clairmont

I. Introduction

Language plays a larger role in our lives than we could ever begin to even imagine. It puts constraints and biases on our thoughts and feelings, heavily figuring into our social conceptions. Not dictating them, but guiding them. Addressing our language is thus an absolutely crucial component of pushing for social change. With all social movements, our language is necessarily interrogated, and biases within it are revealed and brought to be reckoned with. And yet, language itself is never what is truly the issue in these matters. There are often other preexisting social relations that get illustrated through language, and so language itself is inherently tainted. Ultimately, I will argue that language change is a necessary component of social change, however language change must simply supplement social movements, it cannot entirely compose them. In those cases, language change can often simply be a means of becoming a social marker between preexisting social groups, rather than actually bringing about active social change.

This paper will begin by detailing the ways in which matters involving language have contributed to efforts for social change. When speaking of language, this mostly refers to matters involving vocabulary choices. I will touch upon the use of terms such as ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latinx,’ pronouns, and reclaiming slurs as examples of matters of language being implicated in social issues. I will then discuss the ability for social change to be enacted through language change alone. Finally, I will discuss the relationship between language change and social change, ultimately arguing that language change is a necessary part of any social movement, but that it can never be the main means of social change making.

II. Language's Contribution to Social Efforts

When we think of social movements, the language piece is often central, but simultaneously invisible. Social movements often are rooted in addressing harm from a variety of angles, and a necessary component of that is the pain and biases of our own language. It will be clear at the end of this section how language has historically as well as currently been of interest to social movements. In this section, I conclude by discussing language's role in social movements, specifically discussing the examples of 'Hispanic' and 'Latinx,' pronoun use, and the reclamation of slurs.

Prior to discussing how language contributes to social change, I wish to first illustrate the importance of our language on our thought process. Cohn (2000) illustrates this when she describes how she descends into the world and language of defense intellectuals. The more conversations she participated in using the language, the less she feared nuclear war, as if the process of learning the language was itself a part of what removed her from the reality of nuclear war (Cohn 2000). "Speaking the language," Cohn "could no longer really hear it" (Cohn 2000, 713). Through this example, Cohn shows the importance of our socializing, in part through language, on our thought process and outlook. But it is important to note that she was not simply learning this new language, this new vocabulary, in a vacuum, or in her normal environment. She was in a new social environment, and was therefore being socialized in other, non-linguistic ways. This lays the groundwork for showing how our socialization process, both linguistic and otherwise, is crucial. It should not be downplayed, as it holds significant influence on our lived realities.

I want to quickly discuss the concepts of linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism, and how they relate to what I have discussed so far. Linguistic relativity is the hypothesis that the

language someone speaks affects how they perceive the world; linguistic determinism is the hypothesis that language determines thought (Dawson & Phelan 2016). I do not wish to be making an argument that supports linguistic determinism, a linguistic argument fraught with controversy and marked by an outdated, often racist, characterization. Linguistic relativity, while still contested, is less problematic and more so engages with how our language at least in part shapes our social world. I am strictly trying to draw out how our language partly shapes our social world, but in no way wish to argue that it is the sole determining factor.

Not only is there a power struggle regarding the use of certain words and vocabularies, but there is also a power struggle in terms of the meaning of words. This provides important background for the examples that I reflect on more later. Power and authority are important for what words can be used to mean, what they can do socially (McConnell-Ginet 2020). Words themselves put constraints on their users, and the struggle for mastery over words arises primarily from conflicts of interest among language users (McConnell-Ginet 2020). As different uses of words can serve different interests (McConell-Ginet 2020), language is constantly a social war. In examples like the Supreme Court extending the semantic authority of the word 'marriage' to cover same-sex unions despite it not being universally accepted by the American public (McConnell-Ginet 2020), the semantic authority of words is institutionalized to an extent. This institutionalization does not mean that there is not still social disagreement regarding the meaning of 'marriage,' as there still exist people in the U.S. who believe that two same-sex individuals cannot be 'married.' However, it does provide a rather stern social guideline of how language should be used.

Another case of more formal institutionalization of semantic authority is the dictionary. The dictionary is an obvious, and yet covert player in these battles over language meaning and

use. While the dictionary claims to be objective, and editors claim neutrality, there is nothing actually neutral or objective about the practice (Lippi-Green 2012). The practice of compiling a dictionary often necessitates the ordering of social groups in terms of who has the authority to determine how language is best used (Lippi-Green 2012). Within a country that often privileges White rich men, this means that the speech that White rich men produce is often determined the best use of language. Standard language is necessarily constructed and reconstructed by actors like dictionaries who have a vested interest in the concept (Lippi-Green 2012). Non-linguists are often quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language, as they are often unaware it exists to an extent. Because there is so little advocacy about issues of linguistic prescriptivism and linguistic discrimination in the mainstream, harmful ideologies surrounding language-use and linguistic variants are able to roam free.

While it can feel that in today's age, we are interrogating our language more than ever, it is important to recognize that this interrogation of language has been a constant trend in history, as language is constantly changing to adapt to current societal conceptions. Alim and Smitherman remark on how there is a national firestorm that erupts in the U.S. about once every 20 years over Black language (2012). The Ebonics crisis is an illustrative example of this, in which schools in Oakland in 1996-1997 received national attention based on the language of Black students. The controversy called language education policies into question (Baugh 2015). While Black language had a national platform at the time, the argument ultimately missed the point, which is that Black language (and the people who speak it) must be systematically recognized. Language has ultimately always been along for the ride of the changing social landscape within the U.S.

McConnell-Ginet (2020) explores some of the recent social movement language controversies, seeking to understand what threads them together. She introduces the proposal by trans activists to transition from saying 'women' when speaking about those who are pregnant, referring to them rather as 'pregnant people' (McConnell-Ginet 2020). Ultimately, McConnell-Ginet argues that there is a trend in social movements empowering first-person semantic authority (2020). Meaning, people themselves are able to define what these terms mean to them and in a sense impose it on others. However, McConnell-Ginet counters this by establishing that communities are the ultimate semantic authorities (2020). Communities themselves are the ultimate arbiters on both the usage and meaning of vocabulary. If a public outcry is large enough, the people will make it happen, regardless of what is regulated. All of this serves as important background information for the three examples I am about to reflect on.

Getting to the first example, the terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latinx,' it is important to establish that these are contested terms. It is worth considering instances such as these, when terms are imparted on a community and members of that community do not necessarily identify with them. Terms like 'Hispanic' erase the differences between Puerto Ricans and Cubans (Lippi-Green 2012), who the last election has shown have very conflicting interests politically. South America and identities within South America are very diverse, and so it is unfair for American conceptions to be imposed on the identities of others. Terms like these are often not even thought about for those who do not identify with them, though they can actively be harmful. We take our vocabulary for granted, rather than interrogating it and seeing how it erases identities and pushes various narratives.

Discussions of pronoun use are at an all time high in the U.S. right now. They coincide with a resurgence of energy around the gay rights movements and the increased visibility of trans

issues in the U.S. Therefore, as conversations around bathrooms, sports, and bakeries are happening, a conversation around pronoun use has been ignited. The issue of pronouns is two-fold; it encompasses both the general language around 'prefered pronouns,' as well as the use of singular 'they' to refer to non-binary individuals. In both of these cases, our conceptions of gender are being forced to expand. There is a conflict with the boy-girl gender dichotomy that we were socialized into as children in both examples. It shows how our language can change and morph as our conceptions of non-linguistic, social matters also shift. Language is necessarily changing and adapting through the social tides.

Finally, I consider the reclamation of slurs. I am specifically discussing the reclamation of 'queer' by LGBTQ+ community members. Much of what I established for the conversation surrounding pronouns is relevant to the reclamation of 'queer' as well. It signals a cultural shift that embraces ambiguity and flexibility. In terms of its role as a slur, it introduces an interesting conversation around the idea of linguistic ownership. Bucholtz & Zimman (2019) discuss how linguistic ownership can pertain to individual words, phrases, or even entire languages. As I have established, the battle for this ownership can be fierce, however as the social tide shifts, so does the linguistic tide. 'Queer' for many LGBTQ+ individiauls was a word that was rooted in harm in childhood, yet now in adulthood signals liberation. This shows that words can in fact be reclaimed, and that language is actively at odds with itself. Ultimately, these examples show the way in which language is always being renegotiated and interrogated, following along with social changes.

III. Pitfalls of Language Change without Social Change

So, language change is great, right? It is an important part of social movements, and we as linguists should be doing everything we can to interrogate every piece of language in our

vocabulary! Well… not so fast. While language change is an important component of social change, it needs to be accompanied by actual communal social change. If activism is not rooted in the social realities of the society, activists' use of "updated language" will simply become a marker for pre-existing social categories. Simply addressing linguistic inequities and interrogating our vocabularies would not solve racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. This approach would imply a constructionist view of language, meaning an ideology that suggests that language creates social identities (Bucholtz & Zimman 2019). This is of course not the entire story of how social identities are created, as there are many studies (Baugh 2015, Lippi-Green 2012) that suggest that our linguistic insights and judgements are often just social judgements mapped onto language. Therefore, rather than taking a constructionist view when considering the intersection of social issues and language, it is important to take a correlationist view, which attempts to find correlations between social categories and the use of sociolinguistic variants, and analyze linguistic discrimination through this lens (Bucholtz & Zimman 2019). With this view, it is more so a matter of simply considering how language operates with other social conditions and identifications, which paints a more accurate picture than a model devoid of cultural considerations.

As I have stated, linguistic changes will simply be an indicator for existing social categories if social change does not accompany the linguistic changes. Hall-Lew et al. (2010) demonstrate this when they determine whether phonological variables are a potential resource for the expression of political identity, specifically examining the second vowel of 'Iraq.' Hall-Lew et al. demonstrate how Iraq's second vowel appears to index political conservatism when produced as (ah) and political liberalism when produced as (aw) (2010). This example shows how this linguistic difference simply mapped onto the preexisting social categories of Democrats

and Republicans. While this example is not explicitly engaging with linguistic change or social change per say, it does reveal that language is split down partisan lines. Partisan lines, race lines, gender lines, class lines, and more are the ways in which linguistic differences will often split down, all of which do nothing to change social conditions. Rather than language being the actor in this situation, it is simply the means through which other social identities are being expressed. It is not the vowel's pronunciation in this example that is of importance, it is the speakers' means of identification.

A similar story is told when Halmari (2011) examines the distribution of premodified nouns (disabled people) and postmodified nouns (people with disabilities) in the Houston Chronicle from 2002 to 2007. Halmari discusses how this shift from the former to the latter was proposed in the early 1990s and was widely adopted in fields of education and psychology (2011). While this shift had reached more educated circles, and presumably those in higher social circles, it appears as though it did not bleed down. The results of the study showed that the Houston Chronicle favors the non-PC usage with over 70% of the phrases resorting to premodification (Halmari 2011). While the change was adopted in educated and socially stratified environments, this change did not actually bleed down to institutions that more generally reached the public, like the newspaper. This example differs from the last in that the 'Iraq' vowel example was a case of preexisting social categories choosing different uses to signify their social category, whereas this was an example of a communal institution not adapting to a more 'educated' (one could perhaps assume liberal) use of language. Both examples show how language is always political. Language change cannot happen in a vacuum, or top-down. It is necessary that it accompanies real social movements so that it does not simply become a social marker rather than a push for real, actualized social change.

A consideration to make in regards to this conversation is that of the role of the listener. While I have considered the role of the speaker, it is worth noting that the listener is also an active player in the conversation and has their own unique constraints and considerations. Hideko Nornes Abe (1995) explores this in a completely different context — researching Japanese women's language, Nornes Abe shows that language is interactive, as it is negotiated between speech participants. Thus, language belongs not only to the speaker but the listener as well (Abe 1995). This helps demonstrate that language is a two way street. That is, while the speaker can choose to say what the speaker wishes to say, the listener does not have to interpret it the way the speaker wishes the listener to do so. This is the crux of the issue around our language. The wish to be able to use the language that one wishes to use and to have it be heard and accepted by others. As conversations involve a speaker and a listener, if there are no pre-established social conventions, the conversation can turn down a variety of paths, depending on preexisting social lines.

While it is true to some extent that language change will always mark social identities, this is not what I am trying to tease out from this argument. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that, at times, language change does not change the nature, beliefs, or lived reality of those who are linguistically discriminated against, or society as a whole. As a result, it can simply become a social marker that differentiates the "woke" and the "un-woke," or the "educated" and the "uneducated," or Republicans and Democrats. Linguists taking it upon themselves to change language without changing social realities is unhelpful; rather, linguists should make sure that they are educating people on why these changes are necessary, and how our words have weight. Without explaining why "disabled people" is harmful, a writer or reader simply might not know. Therefore, making executive decisions when it comes to matters such as these is not useful. An

educational campaign that explains and justifies linguistic differences is necessary for moving forward.

IV. Relationship between Language and Social Change

So, what is the relationship between language and social change? Clearly, language change cannot act as a stand-in for social change. Then, it will simply be a marker for social categories. It is also clear that language change is certainly at the very least along for the ride with social change, as seen in the cases of the usage of terms like 'Hispanic,' questions of pronoun use, and the reclamation of slurs. Ultimately, I argue that language change must be a necessary part of every social movement, but it must be rooted in the social movement itself. We should not be so narrowly focused on language change that we forget to pursue systemic change.

Interrogating our vocabularies is simply a piece of a much larger puzzle. I would argue that it is a significant piece, crucial to any social movement, whether it be the fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, or classism. As we have seen in the Civil Rights Movement to the Ebonics controversy to questions of non-Black speech borrowing from AAVE and the Black Lives Matter Movement, language will ultimately always appear if it is not addressed. Therefore, it is important for social movements to stress linguistic interrogation. However, it is just as crucial to not lose sight that it is not the entire crux of the (social) issue.

As our language is in many ways a reflection of our social conditions, it is necessary that social conditions change in conjunction with matters of language change. Linguists or those trying to change and interrogate our language cannot take on the brunt of the work alone, as it will likely be a fruitless endeavor. Without addressing the social conditions, the linguistic practice will simply become a social marker, as seen in the case of the Iraq vowel pronunciation.

The relationship between language change and social change is explored in a variety of contexts. One such context is explored in Ana (1999) where Ana looks at the use of animal metaphors when describing immigrants, an unquestionably racist characterization. Ana discusses how language is a powerful tool to shape the way the public views people (1999). And yet, this language does not stand alone. Racism is constructed in public discourse through using language, in part via the use of metaphor (Ana 1999). Key to this characterization is that racism is using language, as a tool of sorts. Therefore, while the language can be changed, this does not mean that the social realities of immigrants would actually change. This also reveals that all language must be interrogated, as language use is rooted in racism and xenophobia. These forms of discrimination use language as a tool to do their dirty work and disseminate their ideology. It is crucial to interrogate our language, but also realize what is behind the language.

Still, the work of linguists is not in vain. Rethinking the way we interrogate our language does not have to mean that linguists are solving racism, but it does mean that through changing certain vocabulary to make it more inclusive, linguists are helping annex a potential discriminatory path and making it more difficult for language to be used as a tool for attacking other social identities. In terms of how we go about addressing this, we need to do better, and go to the communities themselves that are engaging in social movements and ask them what they want from their language, how they wish to be referred to, whether they are insulted or feel included by certain terms. Currently, the dominating ideology is that something as important as language cannot be left to normal people, as if normal people are not smart or aware enough to be in charge of their own language (Lippi-Green 2012). As linguists, we can and must do better and break this existing paradigm. It is our duty to show that normal people are capable enough to

decide their language, and with that help, bring the language up to twenty-first century social standards.

V. Conclusion

It is my hope that this conversation helps encourage linguists to be on the lookout for where they are most needed. Our language is always a work in progress. Our society, we as people, are always changing, evolving. As linguists, it is our job to remind society of their own power to dictate the course of their language. No one knows their language better than they do. We must also help show how our language contains inherent biases, how it can be harmful. So much of our language is taken for granted, assumed as if it was ordained. In reality, much of it is shaped by the same sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism that has shaped the country itself. Our language acts as an agent to help drive our social realities, and will only ever be an actor, albeit a very important one. It is our duty to help language be an agent for good, rather than harm.

Works Cited

Abe, Hideko Nornes. “From Stereotype to Context: The Study of Japanese Women's Speech.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1995, doi:10.2307/3178206.

Alim, H. Samy, and Geneva Smitherman. *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* Oxford University Press, 2012.

Ana, Otto Santa. “`Like an Animal I Was Treated': Anti-Immigrant Metaphor in US Public Discourse.” *Discourse & Society*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1999, pp. 191–224., doi:10.1177/0957926599010002004.

“Authorizing: ‘When I Use a Word It Means Just What I Choose It to Mean... [But Who] Is to Be Master?” *Words Matter: Meaning and Power*, by Sally McConnell-Ginet, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 215–245.

Baugh, John. “SWB (Speaking While Black): Linguistic Profiling and Discrimination Based on Speech as a Surrogate for Race against Speakers of African American Vernacular English.” *Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, 2015, pp. 755–769.

Bucholtz, Mary, and Lal Zimman. “Language in the Social World .” *How Languages Work: an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*, by Carol Genetti and Allison Silver Adelman, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 257–284.

Cohn, Carol. “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.” *Women, Science and Technology*, 2000, pp. 119–135., doi:10.4324/9780203011782-15.

Dawson, Hope, and Michael Phelan. *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. Ohio State University Press, 2016.

Hall-Lew, L., et al. “Indexing Political Persuasion: Variation in the Iraq Vowels.” *American Speech*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2010, pp. 91–102., doi:10.1215/00031283-2010-004.

Halmari, Helena. "Political Correctness, Euphemism, and Language Change: The Case of 'People First.'" *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2011, pp. 828–840., doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2010.09.016.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. Routledge, 2012.