Solidarity Federation
Breaking the laws of language

Retrieved on January 1, 2005 from www.cat.org.au

theanarchistlibrary.org

Breaking the laws of language

Solidarity Federation

Contents

be taken as part of that group. We balance a need to fit in, with a need to remain individual. Every person's language is as unique as their fingerprints. You cannot pin a language down in a dictionary or grammar book and say 'That **is the** English language.' Such books are a snapshot of the language, out of date from the moment they are written.

Pulling in the other direction is the need to stretch the language, so that new things can be expressed in different ways. Each new generation learns the habits of the old and moves on. Nothing stays exactly the same and it's the emerging generation that makes the changes: hairstyles, architecture, music. And of course some people tut — is it nostalgia, need for stability, weariness? Whatever, it's the conservatism of age. Prefabricated chunks of language, cliches — we need them for practical reasons, like lack of time; we can't re-invent the wheel every time we open our mouths. But someone has got to start adapting the wheel or inventing new ways of travel.

Those who resist changes in a living language should have better reasons than: 'That's not the way I was taught when I was a child.' What about good reasons like: 'It's dishonest to use euphemisms to mask the realities of warfare.' 'That's so longwinded and pompous, you're not getting your point across.' If there *is* a law of language, it is that it should be used as a skilful tool for communication. Only complain if it doesn't work. People who invent other laws are using language as a loaded weapon and they are pointing it at people who have already had their voices stifled.

Humour? Again, it's probably best to stick with the death test. 'Fox hunting is the pursuit of the inedible by the unspeakable.' Oscar Wilde has been dead so long now, we can even overlook his sexual preferences.

Foreign speakers saying things like 'I burst myself into tears'? Come on, it's not their language! The cliche is 'burst into tears'. Interesting, though, how the new phrasing adds power to the image.

Pushing Together or Pulling Apart?

The way that languages develop is a delicate balance between two powerful tendencies. Pushing in one direction is the need to conform with existing conventions. The most obvious is the way infants absorb the language they hear and experiment with those sounds to find ways to communicate. Anyone plunged into another language environment has to try to pick up a different set of ways to express themselves. (Up to now, we have demanded that other peoples pick up our English language — a sort of invasion and colonisation by language.) But this need to adapt happens for adult speakers in our home environment — apart from all the different languages spoken in England, there are so many varieties of English. Yes, they are referred to, in a derogatory way, as dialects — the dialects of different regions and classes and ages — but they survive because they work. The fact that they have little status needs to be challenged. 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.' All languages adapt and change because of contact between people. The more contact, the more pressure to change.

That doesn't mean that we immediately take on every style of language we come across. Language is a badge of identity. Some people want to maintain an identity that is distinct and make very little shift in their style of speech; others want to

Why will most people never be 'suitable' for reading the news? A guide to the workings of the grammar police.

Careful what you say, the language police are just around the corner. Don't let them catch you saying that. You'll be in trouble, that's not proper English.

OK, you won't get a fine or sent to jail, but they'll try to stop you passing GO and collecting your 200 pounds. It's done very subtly, by making people feel self-conscious and inadequate about their language. And then they start to mumble, and are seen but not heard.

Games Grammar Police Play

> Can I have another biscuit?
> You've got hands, so it's physically possible.
> Uh?
>
> I didn't do nothing.
> Ah, so you mean you did do something?
> No!

What's odd about these cases is not the language of the first speaker, but the reaction of the second. The message was understood perfectly well. What sort of language user is deliberately awkward, slows down the whole business, and makes the other person feel uneasy or embarrassed? Someone who hasn't grasped what language is for. Not a linguist, certainly, but a pedantic parent or columnist for *The Mail*, or someone aspiring to these groups.

If we wanted to be pedantic (and it's a good laugh to take them on at their own game) we could direct them to the philosopher of language, JL. Austin and his Speech Act Theory. Like all the best theories, it was a brilliant flash of common sense. Although we can often work out the sense of words in isolation; as a social act, language can often have a different force once

it's used in context. 'That's right, just dump your dirty clothes all over the floor.' On the surface, this looks like a congratulation plus a command. But even a child can work out what the speaker actually means.

So why does this co-operative principle break down, once a child is speaking to an adult? Power and status. It's a bit like turning clothing from a practical and personal issue into a power game, dictating who must wear a tie round their neck, where and when. (Only men, with suits, but not in bed as a sexual aid, that's the advice.)

The Nonsense of Language Laws

'You can't begin a sentence with 'but". But, I just have! There's a bit of nonsense for you, saying 'You can't' when you clearly can. Challenge the language pedants, and they rely on two authorities: Latin and Maths. 'To boldly go where no man has been before.' Don't split an infinitive. You couldn't in Latin, because it was a single word with an ending. But in English it's two words 'to go', so there is clearly an option of putting another word in the middle. (There was a more pressing complaint about the Star Trek slogan — Women went there too).

Two negatives make a positive. That's how it works in Maths. So, all languages work in exactly the same way and they work like Maths? Plenty of languages use double negatives: 'No hace? nada' — I didn't do nothing. We all know that repetition is a way of emphasising a point.

Who Gets Picked up on Suspicion?

Repetition is a no no — when it suits them. 'I can't stand it, me.' is ignorant repetition; 'I, myself, think…' is right posh. 'More nicer' and 'most biggest' are wrong, but Shakespeare

was the greatest English writer, so inventive and expressive in quoted lines like 'More nearer' (Hamlet) 'This was the most unkindest cut of all' (Julius Caesar). Whether something is right or wrong depends on the status of the person, and it helps if they've been dead for sometime.

Top-down or Bottom-up?

The fallacy is to have a 'top-down' view of language. Language was not devised by one person, like a game, and it doesn't have rules like a game. The inventor of Snakes and Ladders thought it up and dictates the rules — it only works if everyone accepts that you go up ladders and down snakes. There isn't even an elected governing body for language, like FIFA for football. Language is **not a game**, with a Great Inventor in the Sky.

Try a 'bottom-up' view instead. Languages evolve gradually through contact between groups of people, who need to find a way of communicating. There can only be communication if people share agreed ways of expressing meaning. The notion of a private language is so odd — if a person has their own unique expression that no-one else recognises, it can't be a 'language'.

Children have no status. When they say 'Don't giggle me.' it's a mistake — you can't use a noun as a verb. Oh, unless you're a businessman and want to 'table a motion' or 'chair a meeting'.

Advertising copywriters are a bit naughty about the rules of language too: 'You've been Tangoed' but, well, they're making loads of money, so we'll put up with their funny ways. And it might be useful to have a few of their catchy political slogans.

Poets? 'a grief ago'. A bit mad, some of them on drugs, but we'll make an exception for culture. And we could turn it into exam fodder.