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Week 1 - Notes

In this class we are going to be looking at language production from a more theoretical perspective. One of the key theoretical issues related to language production is that of variability. The defining feature of human language, in addition arguably to its scope, is the tremendous degree of variability not only within a language or even an individual language user, but also across languages. In this class we will be focusing on the former, but in order to do that we need to first get a grip on our own perspectives regarding language in general and individual languages in particular. For that reason, we have done this summer reading project, trying to come face to face with our own beliefs and grapple with some of the ideas we have about language and individual languages, so that we might better understand the role of variability in language, which is, in fact, what sociolinguists study.

Language Myths

There are all sorts of myths regarding language principally because as human beings language is an essential component of our lives. It is what makes us human (cognitively) and allows us to be part and parcel of human society. The fact that someone has a language, as most of us do, however, does not necessarily mean that they know very much about language itself. The role that language plays in our lives, however, does make it an area of if not of strong scrutiny, at least an area where very strong beliefs are held. Language forms an integral an essential part of our identity and his social creatures this extends to different social groups to which we belong. The languages we speak and how we speak of them is a main feature of each person's identity.

For teachers of language there are understandably many issues that we need to grapple with in relation to both the nature of language and the identity issue and where the two mesh. This is made even more challenging when we are dealing with additional languages and foreign languages in particular. Folk ideologies about language and specific languages like English play an important role in how one goes about both learning a language and using a language and teachers (who are supposed to be better informed) often find themselves at odds with the prevailing set of beliefs a society may have. It should be strongly acknowledged though that one of the main jobs of teaching is to both build on but at the same time alter the beliefs of our students.

The myths presented below from Bauer and Trudgill (1998) represent some of the more common beliefs that English speakers, and more specifically people in the US, have regarding language and again more specifically the English language. They provide an effective and hopefully interesting starting point for our discussion on variability within language. These same sets of beliefs are things that we as teachers of English in South Korea need to both be aware of and confront as they are the least

that many of our students will hold. But of course the very use of the word myth and else that these beliefs are in some way flawed. Although all beliefs, including myths start with some grain of truth or reasoning, they very often quickly move beyond this and enter the realm of the flawed or implausible based on the current state of theoretical knowledge. We will, therefore, take a brief look at these myths as we have discussed them in class and see if we can further debunk them slightly as we move forward into the course and a more specific discussion of variability within the language and across language use.

Bauer and Trudgill (1998) contains 21 different myths. Let's take a brief look at each one seeing what it might mean for us in our specific context.

Myth 1: The meanings of words should not be allowed to vary or change

Well, this is just ridiculous. We all know that languages are in a constant state of flux and this applies to all levels (in a presumably hierarchical system) and types of units, including or even especially vocabulary. In fact, word meaning change is a very well studied phenomenon both cross-linguistically (cognates) and diachronically (in one language across time). Less well studied in mainstream theoretical linguistics is the phenomenon of synchronic word meaning change. This is basically the same word being used for multiple, but somehow related, meanings at the same general point in time. This can be a very daunting phenomenon for language learners and is, therefore, often simply ignored. In fact, the nature of language analysis almost requires that we freeze language in order to study it. This practice has carried over to the teaching languages as grammar/structure has traditionally been the focus of subsequent language study. We generally teach language as it were a fixed and regular form, but this is far from the reality of an ever-changing, non-rule-based entity we call language.

Myth 2: Some languages are just not good enough

This myth relates to the belief of some people that certain languages deserve to die. It is based on an extension of the Darwinistic survival of the fittest philosophy. English is not only the current undisputed global lingua franca, but it is also a powerful language killer. People have often interpreted this to mean that some languages (like triumphant English) are inherently better than others. This applies in a Gramscian sense even to those of supposed lesser languages. While languages do vary greatly in their degree of power and, therefore, even their use, these limitations are far more social than linguistic in nature. English has been a *successful* language not because the language itself is somehow better than others, but because of the people who speak English and their actions across a variety of social fronts. All languages share the same linguistic potential for being powerful. It is the peculiarities of history as played out in social situations which render some languages more powerful than others. Feelings of linguistic inadequacy plague many English learners and teachers of English whose dominant language is not English and these feelings can lead to many problems. Different languages need to/can be learned differently based on the social situation of the learners to their language and the target language.

Myth 3: The media are ruining English

This myth is similar to the first one in that it basically revolves around the idea that people do not like language to change. As language is an important part of our

identity, it is understandable that some people would take great offense to people doing things differently. This is especially true of the media because not only is the media there to be heard and read, but they are also supposed to represent the norm. The media is supposed to transcend regional and social (etc.) differences. Many if not most people in many societies, despite obvious evidence to the contrary, feel they are the norm and feel their values are under attack through the changes/differences they are able to perceive in language use. We mentioned above that language can be defined by its variability. It is variability which gives human language its vast power. But language is not just variable and variability is not unconstrained. To work effectively, language needs to operate on norms and variability from those norms needs to be constrained. Most of the variability language users produce is hardly noticeable as it is part of how we use language, but when it is noticeable (the changes are too big) they often grate on us. This is often because people have very hard and fast beliefs/feelings about certain types of structures, sounds or words. Therefore, the reactions, as we read in this myth, are sometimes excessive.

#### Myth 4: French is a logical language

Since we are not French speakers and are, due to our career choice, probably not Francophiles either, it is easy for us to see the fallacy or even the ridiculous nature of this myth. It is somehow ludicrous to claim that one language is somehow more logical than any other. Languages are inextricably linked to thought. Therefore, every language is the best at expressing the logic of the speakers of that language. The conventions, structures and vocabulary of a language, have evolved to represent adequately (but not exactly) the thoughts of its speakers. Therefore, it is easy for the French to claim that their language is the most logical. It should be - for them. The fact that for several hundred years French was the most powerful language in Europe and on the international scene, means that many people will also aspire (or have aspired to) to high proficiency in French and may also have bought into this fallacy. In effect, this is the ranting of a group of arrogant monolinguals or stilted language users. Both societies and languages change, but not always at the same pace. Thus when a foreign language takes on an important role in a society, this is often due to or sometimes even the cause of rapid societal change (and this, in turn, may lead to changes in the way people think). Often new languages are employed to fill in the new gaps created by societal change and this may lead people to favor the new language as being modern and dynamic, with the older language deemed as traditional, etc. When languages are competing for the hearts, mouths, and minds of a society's members.

#### Myth 5: English spelling is kattastroffik

Well, English spelling is catastrophic on the surface, but there are some underlying principles which do hold it all together. It is beyond the scope of the myth and certainly of my brief commentary here to elaborate on the system of English language spelling. The bottom line is that English spelling is generally systematic if one looks deep enough. Linguists like to do this type of thing. It is their job. Chomsky and Halle (1968) in a seminal book on phonology claimed that English spelling should be thought of as representing the underlying representations of words. That is the basic forms of words before they have been varied or altered. This might be a good way of looking at this for a linguist, but it does still not help a child or language learner who is trying to figure out how to spell English words. The reality is that it takes English

speaking children longer how to read than children with more transparent spelling systems (Dahaene, 2009). But the spelling system in English serves to preserve a word's recognition despite morphological changes as well as dialectal variations. Some have likened English to Chinese in that for both one simply has to memorize the shape of a word, but the comparison while in some ways valid is misleading. The English spelling system is phonetic in its base with logographic characteristics while Chinese is inherently logographic with elements of phonetics. In any case, while not really catastrophic, the English spelling system is a challenge.

#### Myth 6: Women talk too much

This is simply not true and the findings related here provide food for thought regarding our classrooms. The bottom line is that in mixed gender situations, especially more formal ones men tend to talk more than women, even in societies with high perceptions of gender equality. Language use is related to power and in many situations across societies men are seen as having more power.

#### Myth 7: Some languages are harder than others

Linguists argue that all languages are equal. They are equally adept at encoding the world and societies of their speakers so that that society can be pondered and discussed or a discussion can ensue smoothly in that society. This does not mean languages are the same. Some have much more complicated grammatical structures (Finnish, as a possible example) while others have less fixed grammatical structures but more varied lexical ones (English or Chinese, for example). So, languages are different but equal. They need to be equal because they all perform the same set of functions for their speakers. To say that one language is harder or more sophisticated than another is tantamount to claiming that some societies are more developed or complex in general than others.

#### Myth 8: Children can't speak or write properly anymore

This is a fallacy held by those who glamorize the past. The reality is that the literacy rate in the US and UK is at its highest, as is incidentally the rate of English spoken at home in the US. In reality, schools are doing a much better job overall than in the past and for much larger segments of the population. In the good old days most people didn't go to school past elementary or maybe middle school. The students in upper secondary and tertiary education were the social or academic elites. They were way above average. But that average was abysmally low compared with today. Certainly this also comes from the fact that young people are still learning - well everything. A young person does not have the same command of a language, in general, than more experienced language users. On the one front the comparisons just aren't fair, on the other they are not at all accurate.

#### Myth 9: In the Appalachians they speak like Shakespeare

This is just ludicrous. Although it is certainly a reality that different regions of the world show quite different rates of linguistic change, there are no regions, despite many myths claiming this, where the click change sadly stops. It is, therefore, impossible to believe that a region of the United States would still be speaking what may be somehow perceived of as Victorian or Shakespearean English. This is probably a very strong case of wishful thinking and language used propaganda. The

Appalachians are traditionally poor parts of the United States and obviously they are trying to get the horse to go there to generate income. They are taking advantage of the common view of the Appalachians as being quite backward compared to the rest of the country but of course they can't be backward in the they still speak a dialect of English that's more than 400 years old without any change having occurred.

Myth 10: Some languages have no grammar

This myth comes from people who believe that the verbal and nominal declensions of Latin are somehow the accepted norm across all languages. There was a time when people believed that Latin was a divine language given to people directly by God and as a result many attempts were made to not only judge languages from the point of view of Latin but actually make language is more Latin. Languages that do not have systems/properties similar to those in many of the older or classical Indo-European languages like Greek, Latin, or Sanskrit may be claimed to have no grammar. Really, all languages have grammar. Languages employ different systems for structural encoding. This myth is further exacerbated by languages which may not have a generally used written form. People think if there is no grammar book, then there is no grammar. Besides all this there is also the seemingly simple issue of what grammar actually means. Before we can say that some languages have no grammar we need to come up with an adequate definition of grammar itself. If you asked most people on the street they probably wouldn't be able to do that.

Myth 11: Italian is beautiful, German is ugly

This relates to the culture and the people who speak the language, not the actual language. German, and rightfully so on many accounts, is considered an ugly language because people simply dislike German people as a result of actions taken in the first half of the last century. Germans for most people are world were the enemies and they did perpetrate a huge number of atrocities leading up to and during the second world war. As a result Germans are portrayed in common pop culture as evil. Even in the 2006 George Clooney movie entitled *the good German*, the Germans are bad (not good). Italian, on the other hand, is a wonderful and cute as a language because we see Italy is a beautiful country, Italians as beautiful people, and of course very romantic. These basic images are then projected onto the language itself. They have no basis in fact. Whether a language is beautiful or ugly really depends on who is speaking it. Some people have pleasant voices while others have really unpleasant voices that great and it really doesn't matter what language they speak. But this myth clearly shows us how people have very strong beliefs about what they find pleasant or unpleasant. Is important, therefore, for us to try to get our students to develop positive associations with English, our target language, so they may be more strongly motivated to learn the language. Obviously we are drawn to things that are perceived as being beautiful. Even though these perceptions may be random, they are still very powerful.

Myth 12: Bad grammar is slovenly

This whole myth is annoying because it makes a very strong and totally incorrect assumption that there is such a thing as universal ideas about what is good or bad grammar. The reality is, despite hundreds of grammar books being written for English, that there are no universally accepted norms for the language. Of course there are some general things which apply more generally the vendor also many tricky

areas where grammarians will argue back and forth. What is often perceived as good grammar is based on norms but is often more or less random. Each person has their own particular definition of what is good or not good. As I mentioned in class the whole question of what is good or not good is really a moot point because different situations will allow people to use very different grammatical structures which may not be acceptable or as acceptable in a different context. We can only analyze grammar from the point of use. There are no real absolutes and grammar despite the fact that so many people wish there were. And of course many language teachers are obsessed with the idea of grammar. Grammar has always been the central point of foreign language learning and teaching similar because it's something which we perceive as being doable in the classroom. But too much focus on grammar is extremely detrimental. I know someone, an English teacher, who is fixated on grammar to the point where despite it actually fairly high level of English he cannot read books very well nor can he listen or watch movies very well because his mind is not taken be on the grammar. He his soul preoccupied with analyzing the grammar and trying to figure out whether it's right or wrong that he has no idea what the meaning is. And unfortunately I think he's drawing his students into the same trap. What I often seem to find and he is a great case of this is that nobody really trust any of the language they hear or read. I get e-mails from him almost every day asking me if sentences that he has read or heard or correct or incorrect. I find this is a tragic way for someone to use their time. Rather than trying to find out what the meaning may be and why someone may have said something he's just obsessed with the correctness, but I'm sure this is also something which is passing on to his students and uses the exam as an excuse for doing this. Yikes!

#### Myth 13: Black children are verbally deprived

We should be very leery of any myth which overgeneralizes and most of these do. I think it impossible to say that all people of a particular group will always fit a certain pattern. Plus it is ludicrous to say that black children in the US are verbally deprived because that's what can't be true for all black children in the US. We may try to see if this is generally true but again the main issue here is the context. In certain contexts it appears that African-American children are not at all verbally deprived, but taken out of their comfort zone and put them in a context where they are not quite sure how to behave then they're going to be silent and I think this is true of any person who is placed in a situation out of their comfort zone and asked to perform. Most African-American children in the United States grow up speaking a dialect that can be quite different from the standard norm. When they attend schools they are expected to perform in that standard norm but if they have not been taught that standard norm and merely been exposed for maybe television then it is certainly not easy and what ensues is generally silence. The fact that many teachers in the US, often coming from an Anglo, middle-class background, already have many stereotypes about how black students will perform (badly) then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This again is his example of a majority group which sees themselves as being the only right group trying to inflict their values on the other groups and we see parallels with global English and Korean, except the difference, and this is a major one, is that it is the Koreans themselves are inflicting global English upon themselves and generating their own feelings of inadequacy rather than having someone do it for them, although there are certainly in the speakers who have come to Korea in the past and they're

probably still here which also do feel that they are superior. I would like to think, however, that most of the editing was speaking teachers in Korea did not feel that way. Such feelings generally lead to no good both on the part of the teacher with those feelings and the students who have to deal with that teacher.

#### Myth 14: Double negatives are illogical

This myth is an example of the power of prescriptive grammar. Sometime in the 1700s when the publishing industry began to really take off and the cost of publishing books produced greatly, people started producing all sorts of different grammar books related to languages. The fact that many of these people were not really trained linguists (the field of linguistics didn't even exist at the time) but rather just smarty-pants annoying types of rich people with very strong opinions didn't stop them from publishing grammar books which became very influential. The thing about these grammar books, as we mentioned above, is that many of the grammatical rules presented were more or less random and many of them were not based at all on how people actually used English but rather what the author himself felt to be correct. As we mentioned above at this time lots of these self-proclaimed grammarians were trying to bring English closer to Latin structurally. This double negative rule is a perfect example of this. It is a prescriptive rule but was made up by someone that has no real basis on the actual use of the English language which has simply come to be widely accepted. In reality, there is nothing illogical about double negatives. A double negative is often used to intensify the meaning in an utterance. Interestingly, they are used both in speaking and writing, albeit in different ways as was shown in the initial examples in the myth. For us as language teachers the point that we want to focus on here is the fact that a lot of what we have in grammar books is random as it isn't real. There are recent attempts to design and create grammar books based on actual usage patterns or what we can call corpus. One such book would be Carter and McCarthy (2006).

#### Myth 15: TV makes people sound the same

This is an interesting myth because even if people don't believe the specifics of the myth is still often believe the TV has a huge effect on the language that people produce. For us as language teachers this brings in the whole idea of how much or what people actually learn from watching television shows and movies. What the research shows is that television and here we can also include things like movies do not have a large effect on language in general. For the most part people pick up specific vocabulary items and expressions from TV and movies, but they generally do not have a strong effect on syntax, morphology, pronunciation. And this research seems to correlate very well with research on early language learning which basically says that children cannot learn a language simply by being exposed to it through mediums like television. The only way for a child to pick up a new language is through focused interaction. Children need people to focus on them. By extension, we can argue that for adults the same basically applies. Adults may be able to learn a little bit more than children by watching television and movies but again what they learn is going to be severely limited compared to the time that they may actually put into it. There is also the issue of accessibility and may not be possible for someone to watch a TV show or a movie and actually appropriate useful material was the material at their level is already not high enough. In order to learn something you need to already know

something. So I think the basic idea here is that we need to be a little bit careful about using television as a language teacher. There is certainly things that we can do with television that television can not replace the interactional requirements around which language revolves.

Myth 16: You shouldn't say 'it is me' because 'me' is accusative

This is a rather uninteresting boring myth which people obsessed with grammar seem to like talking about. It harps on points of confusion due to the greatly diminished system of overt case marking an English. Indo-European languages in the past had very strong overt case marking systems, which we can still see today in languages like Russian and to lesser extent German and Spanish. English has lost its overt case marking on nouns with the exception of some pronouns. In this system, *I* is a nominative pronoun, *me* is an accusative pronoun, and *mine* is a genitive pronoun. But the system was breaking down as people no longer care and at some point *I am me* may actually co-join into one pronoun. In most cases we don't really have difficulty with this as the usage patterns are quite straightforward. In the cases where we don't have clear overt subjects as in the example "it is me" then there is some confusion. Some grammarians believe that since there is no clear subject in this utterance that the entity following the verb should be a normative case. Others believe that it is a dummy subject and as a result the element following the verb should be in accusative case. Many people will simply just use the accusative case today. It is certainly the most common usage.

Myth 17: They really speak bad English down south and in New York City

This is more or less the same myth that we found related to the beauty of Italian and the ugliness of German but on a more localized scale for Americans anyway. The bottom line is that people have very strong beliefs about certain types of people and they these beliefs are then projected onto the language they speak. Thus if a person speaks with a strong New York City dialect people often perceive that person negatively. They may be a criminal, most typically a gangster. Likewise, if a person speaks with a strong Southern dialect than they may often be perceived as being very poorly educated and having a very low menial labor type of job or maybe even no job at all, especially in the case of Appalachians. This underlies a general belief in American society that people with strong regional dialects are generally not very smart and or not very well educated. It goes beyond just the New York Southern type of belief. It is a general estimation of someone based on the fact that they had any type of regional dialect. This of course is a result of the unique history of the United States in that in the US people move around a lot and it is fully expected that people would, if they are smart, will lose their regional accent as soon as they move away from their home region. Of course there are also different levels of dialect. Someone from the South who has their English colored lightly will not be overly negatively perceived unlike someone who has very strong elements. The strong elements, however, are usually reserved were kept for more in formal types of speech so the negative reaction of people may simply be to the fact that these people are not able to register shift appropriately. Register shift in American English generally means moving out of a regional dialect and into a more standardized dialect.

Myth 18: Some languages are spoken more quickly than others



This is an interesting myth which almost everybody believes because it is part of our perception. Perception is always different than the reality. And our perceptions change on a regular basis. Thus the way you perceive the language will be determined by the existing cognitive makeup that you have. So, someone who has a relatively low level of proficiency in a given language will not be able to perceive that language the same way as someone with a higher-level of proficiency. In a general sense people of lower proficiency will perceive that language as moving faster simply because they do not have the cognitive capacity to notice and focus attention on all the different elements. As we mentioned in class if this person is a new language learner then they may not have strategies either which will allow them to compensate for gaps in their knowledge or proficiency. So really, the rate at which we think a person is speaking is not really the rate at which they are speaking. It is all relative. As with some of the other myths just because it is not true doesn't mean that it's not important or extremely relevant to people. Our discussion in class revolved around the idea of whether it's better for a teacher to speak faster or slower and we came to the conclusion that it is certainly much better for the teacher to try to speak at a regular pace, not specifically very fast, nor specifically slowly. If we have to do one of the other that it is certainly much better to speak faster as opposed to slower provided we have brought our students up to that level in a systematic matter and enable them to develop strategies to compensate for the speed. It's a general technique in training. You have to push people to their limits and that includes the speed of the input. By pushing his speed of the input higher than their limits move up as well and then people attain greater proficiency.

Myth 19: Aborigines speak a primitive language

This is just a racist view of the world. There are no real primitive societies as anthropologists would now view this. Some societies are more traditional but are certainly no less sophisticated than others. If an aboriginal society is not primitive then it would be very strange for their language to be so. Basically this would mean that their language is totally inadequate for the needs of their society and we know that languages are specifically attuned to the needs of each specific society so this obviously can't be true. The only exception to this would be developing societies and languages in the case of pidgins and Creoles but these are very rare cases which really don't exist in the world today.

With 20: Everyone has an accent except me

This is a very simple and obviously very blatant example of the basic idea that each person often perceives themselves as being the norm. As he mentioned in class this can be often seen as a very monolingual idea. People who have achieved a certain degree of proficiency in a second language or more related don't see themselves or the world in this way. People who have only one system will often see their system as being the only best one and will judge everyone else based on that. This is obviously problematic when we are dealing with a language of such diversity as English and when we are dealing with variability as the basis of language itself. These are the people who end up being prescriptive in how they teach and how they view the world. But their prescriptions only include themselves and not their students or anyone else as a result these people end up more or less failing in their role as language teachers as they have fundamentally misunderstood how things work.

### Myth 21: America is ruining the English language

This myth may be taken as an extension of the media is ruining English myth, but is also more than that. It is obviously a myth held by other English speakers and for the most part probably British people. It can be understood in that English came from England, but for better or for worse England is no longer the most important country regard regarding the English language. The United States is by far the most powerful English-speaking country and probably has the most number of English speakers. Thinking just purely about numbers the Philippines has more English speakers than the United Kingdom, depending on how we define the term English speakers. Moving back to the miss the simple were false around the fact that the United States has eclipsed the UK as the leader of the world. As a result of media and pop culture, the UK is exposed to lots of Americanisms. As with the media itself these Americanisms are not fundamentally changing the face of the English language as it is spoken in the United Kingdom and Australia, New Zealand or any other English speaking regions around the world. Rather there are few lexical items and a few fixed expressions that enter the language for a while. But these types of things really annoy people and get very strong reactions. In effect the changes are very small and often only temporary but they make people really upset because they feel that they are values are under threat. They somehow feel that they are no longer in power situation, which may be true. This shows just how important our language is to our identity and some people may really resist any kind of change inevitable though it may be.

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