

# Language matters

A guide to everyday questions about language

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## Preface

This book has two authors, one who's been teaching linguistics since 1973, and another who's been teaching languages and linguistics since 1998. Journalists, friends, and people we just happen to have conversations with approach us in that role with questions—ranging all over the board—that often reveal misconceptions about language. We use language in most of our daily interactions with other people, so the types of questions that can arise are at least as varied as the types of situations in which we use language. Here are some examples:

How can we stop our children from using bad grammar?  
Why don't we reform English spelling so that the words will  
be spelled exactly as we all say them?  
Why are some languages so much harder to speak than  
others?

The first question is problematic because the whole notion of good versus bad grammar is problematic. How do we decide whose grammar is good and whose is not? Language changes from one generation to the next, no matter what, and change is simply that—neither improvement nor deterioration; it is merely change. The second question is based on the assumption that we all pronounce words in the same way. Even within the United States that is false, but certainly, when we look at Canada, England, India,

Australia, Nigeria, and other countries where English is one of the national languages, the falsity of that assumption is obvious. The third question is based on another false assumption. So far as we know, hearing children around the world acquire the spoken language of the people around them with equal ease, and deaf children around the world who are exposed to a sign language acquire that sign language with equal ease. Therefore, it may not make sense to think about languages as being inherently difficult or not. (We qualify our conclusion with "may not" rather than "does not" because we have a colleague who works on Navajo, and the intricacies of that language make us wonder whether perhaps linguists are blithely leaving out Navajo when they arrive at such conclusions.) It might well be true, on the other hand, that it is harder for a speaker of a particular language X than for a speaker of a particular language Y to learn a particular language Z in adulthood. We carry the information we know about language from one language to the next as we learn new languages, and that may well affect the ease with which we learn the next language. Nevertheless, we don't know of any particular language K, for example, that stands out as being more difficult for speakers of all other languages to learn in adulthood.

When we respond to questions about language, sometimes our knowledge of particular languages and of the formal nature of linguistic principles helps us. This is particularly true if the questions are about how language is produced and processed or about particular sociolinguistic facts, such as differences between regional speech patterns. But we are struck by how often these questions could have been answered by anybody who took the time to seriously consider language use. Ordinary speakers have a great deal of knowledge about language, and if they apply common sense in analyzing language, they can debunk many common misconceptions.

Most people, however, have little idea of how to approach language questions. If you want to learn about language in a formal way, we encourage you to pick up a linguistics textbook or to take a linguistics course. However, if you want to learn how to look at language issues so that you can make sensible and responsible decisions about language in your daily life, then this book will help you.

Although there are two authors of this book, we divided up the work, with one of us taking the lead on each chapter. So the chapters use an *I* that is sometimes one of us and sometimes the other.

The chapters in this book are divided into two parts. Part I deals with language as a human ability. Part II deals with language in the context of society. At the end of each chapter is a list of readings for further consultation, as well as keywords for an Internet (e.g., Google) search. Another wonderful resource is the website of videos on language set up by the Linguistic Society of America: <http://www.uga.edu/lava/Archive.html>.

The chapters invite you into one way of approaching language. They help you to uncover assumptions behind language questions so that you can evaluate them. They help you to recognize what sorts of things might be evidence for or against different positions on a language issue. And they help sort out the evidence in a systematic and methodologically sound way. Although only fifteen issues are addressed in this book, we hope that reading these chapters will give you the confidence to approach other language issues in a systematic way.

Linguistics is a field in which reasonable people can and do disagree. Nevertheless, in this book we are rarely equivocal (we are linguists, not politicians). However, the arguments are laid out step by step, so if you disagree at any point along the way, you can diverge and find your own answers, knowing, at least, what our position is and why.

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# Part I

Language: The Human Ability