Language Myths: Beliefs About Language That Are Harmfully Wrong

ANTHRO 19
Spring 2008
R 11:00-11:50
Haines 310

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And other readings as listed below, to be posted to the course website.

The Topic: This seminar treats the topic of language myths by examining some popular beliefs about language, specific languages, and communication that appear to not only be wrong but potentially harmful to oneself and others in our society. In most Western societies language is often thought of as a neutral vehicle that provides a labeling system for the material world. Sayings such as “talk is cheap” and “actions speak louder than words” reveal a lack of appreciation of the social work that language performs and even a cultural bias against seeing language activity as a form of social action. Thus even though it can be arguably maintained that our language ability is our most distinctive and important capacity as a species, most individuals engage in linguistic and communicative activity with only minimal awareness of either the structure of their languages or the explicit and implicit communicative norms of their society. This misrecognition often leads to sexist stereotypes and racist views of non-mainstream languages. Some scholars have suggested that the dominant society’s beliefs about “smaller” languages, which often lack the support of an associated nation-state, play a role in undermining these languages and contributing to their projected demise. By shedding light on unexamined properties of language structure and language use, the course will expose a variety of language myths and increase a critical awareness, on the part of students, of the wide spectrum of socio-cultural projects in which language and communication are routinely deployed.
Meetings:

#1 April 3 Introductions, What are language myths?

Introduction of Topics, of Class Personnel

#2 April 10 Myth: The Meanings of Words Should Not Change over Time/Young People do not Speak Properly

Read: Peter Trudgill. 2001. The Meanings of Words Should Not be Allowed to Change LM 1-8

#3 April 17 Myth: Some Languages Have No Grammar

Read: Winfred Bauer. 2001 Some Languages have no Grammar. LM 77-84.
Ray Harlow. 2001 Some Languages are Just Not Good Enough. LM 9-14
Jenny Cheshire. 2001 Double Negatives are Illogical. LM 113-122.

#4 April 24 Myth: The Media Represents English, Accented English, and other languages in an Unbiased Manner

#5 May 1 Myth: Women Talk Too Much!


#6 May 8 Myth: Jokes about Other Languages and their speakers are Harmless


#7 May 15 Myths: Dying Languages Deserve to Die Because They Are Inferior; Some languages are Primitive.


#8 May 22 Myth: Losing Endangered Languages is Basically Good Because Everything Can Be Said in One of the Surviving Languages

Read: Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine. 2000. Lost Words, Lost Worlds (Chapter 3 of) Vanishing Voices, the extinction of the world's Languages, pp. 50-77. Oxford University Press.
#9 May 29  Myths: African-American Children Are Verbally Deprived and the African American Community Speaks Only A Single Style of Speech


#10 June 5  Myth: The Language of Hip-Hop Music is Loaded with Profanity, Misogyny and has No Redeeming Qualities


Grading: Grading is obligatorily S/U. There are no written assignments. Students earn passing grades by 1) attending seminar meetings (and missing no more than 2 meetings) and 2) by engaging in full and informed participation in the discussion of readings. For students who do not participate in seminar discussion on a regular basis, written reviews of the assigned articles will be required to earn a passing grade. Also the second permitted absence must be accompanied by a 1page review of the work assigned for discussion.