

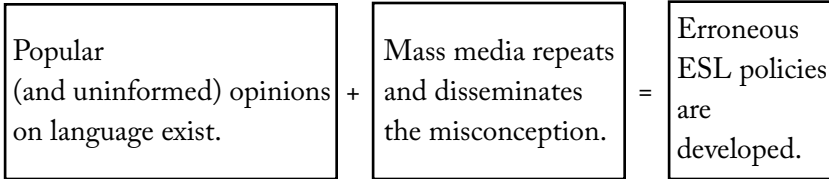
Introduction

Language fascinates and captivates. I have never met an adult who could not or would not talk about language. Everyone seems to have an opinion on language, dialects, and grammar, and few people seem interested in changing any of their linguistic opinions. When people find out that I am an English teacher (and a linguist), they feel free to tell me all sorts of things about language, yet they are never quite sure how they came to this knowledge, despite being steadfast in their opinion. They know, as do linguists, that language occupies a central place in our lives, and they cling tenaciously to their views about language and its role in society. Unfortunately, myths and misconceptions abound when it comes to language. Often what people tell me and what I see in the mainstream press are inaccurate, misleading, and, in the worst cases, dangerous.

In this book, I expose linguistic ideas that are held by the general public and even some educational policymakers. English as a second language (ESL) and mainstream teachers need to understand language so they can help shape better language policies on a variety of issues: bilingual education, non-standard dialects, accents, Ebonics, language change, slang, and the role of grammar in language education. These are perennial hot topics for educators, parents, and politicians and are commented on by countless pundits in the popular media, and these comments influence public opinion as well as teacher attitudes. The aim of this book is not to settle all language issues but rather to highlight popular linguistic fallacies and how they influence debates regarding language, and how these ultimately affect language policies in and out of the classroom.

The thesis of this book is simple: ESL teachers should work to debunk popular and misguided myths that dominate the general public's understanding of language. These myths are spread by the modern media and

ultimately have real-world repercussions in that they affect classroom practices and educational policies.



Linguists Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill (1999) question how language is so misunderstood today despite all that has been learned over the years about language and how it functions as a system. Somewhere there is a breakdown in the dissemination of linguistic knowledge and, unfortunately, the inaccurate opinions and reports are often more influential than the accurate ones. Bauer and Trudgill (1999) suggest the breakdown comes from people tuning out the esoteric works of professional linguists who rarely write for non-linguists. Like most professionals, linguists forget a general audience when they write. If we look at some of the best-selling books on language and linguistics—*The Story of English* (McCrum, MacNeil, & Cran, 1986), *The Mother Tongue* (Bryson, 2001), *Do You Speak American?* (MacNeil & Cran, 2005)—note that none were written by a linguist (Bauer & Trudgill, 1999). This is not to say that these books contain misleading information, only that they were not written by those who know the most about language. Because linguists are focused on conducting their own and keeping up with others' research, they lack time to write for non-linguists. So myths continue and are spread by “word of mouth” and, ultimately, some misconceptions reach the status of urban legends.

This book clarifies some of the most common myths about language and language acquisition, particularly those that affect ESL teachers and the decisions they make when they teach English language learners (ELL). These language issues are not relevant to only ESL teachers. They also apply to mainstream teachers given the fact that so many classrooms have not only ELLs but also dialect-minority students (native English speakers who use a non-standard dialect) in their classrooms. A reasonable case could be made that language is at the core of all education;

thus, there is a need for a clear understanding of language. This task of helping ELLs is becoming not only a responsibility of the ESL teacher, but all teachers because ELLs are becoming more prevalent in all schools and in all classes. The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition notes that between 1995 and 2006, the number of ELLs grew 57.17 percent (2006). There is every indication that this trend will continue.

So what are some examples of language policies that adversely affect students and that have been prompted by an inaccurate understanding of language or language acquisition? One example concerns language restriction. In the early 1900s in the United States, the government imposed discriminatory policies that restricted the use of languages other than English. This was eventually a death sentence for many native American languages. This linguistic prohibition became particularly intense during the 1930s when Native American children were sent to boarding schools to “Americanize” them. The Americanizing process began with an effort to proscribe the use of any non-English language. To use a language other than English (even if the children were fluent in English) was considered an impediment to full enculturation into mainstream American society. Children would literally have their mouth washed out with soap if they used a Native American language on the playground.

Another example of linguistic prohibition in the United States happened during WWI and WWII, when speaking or even studying German in the United States was considered a sign of disloyalty. As a result, German as a foreign language was dropped from many college curricula. This sort of anti-German language sentiment reached its zenith with the passage in 1917 of the Babel Proclamation in Iowa, which prohibited the use of German in public. Iowa’s governor, William Harding, deemed speaking German an affront to being American. He said:

The official language of the United States and the state of Iowa is the English language. Freedom of speech is guaranteed by federal and state constitutions, but this is not a guarantee of the right to use a language other than the language of this country—the English language. (Quoted in Frese, 2005).

Restricting the use of languages other than English continues today in U.S. classrooms and, where possible, in society. In 2005, Supercuts®, the hair salon chain, was named in a lawsuit for implementing an English-only environment in which employees were reprimanded for speaking Spanish while they worked and during their breaks in the employee lounge. This policy was implemented in 22 Supercuts® stores in Chicago because it was deemed that speaking Spanish was, according to signs posted by managers at Supercuts®, “disrespectful” to customers (O’Connor, 2005).

The linguistic question here is this: Is it possible to legislate what language is spoken on the playground, studied at school, or spoken during a work break? There are no clear answers. What these examples do illustrate, however, is that language policies are implemented routinely in various contexts of human interaction: government, education, and business. And policies such as the Babel Act or that of Supercuts® were not as carefully considered. Being forbidden to use one’s mother tongue can be frustrating and even traumatic. Classroom or school policies that forbid a language other than English can have devastating effects on ELLs because their language is denigrated.

While a ban on a language can certainly lead to problems, there can also be negative repercussions due to the use of a dialect (language variety) or accent (pronunciation) that leads to discrimination. In 1992, a Treasury Department official in Washington, DC, complained that a Filipino security guard was hard to understand. The result? Five Filipino security guards were all removed from their positions. There had been no other complaints, but a new *de facto* policy was implemented that required “native-like” accents. The security guards sued their employer to restore their “honor and dignity” under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which prohibits employers from discriminating against any individual “because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin”), and the federal court recognized that this sort of language policy was discriminatory (Lippi-Green, 1997).

Policymakers (politicians, educators, and business owners) should understand language’s fundamental role in human interaction as well as basic concepts about language before policies are implemented.

For example, research has consistently shown that school policies that strictly prohibit the use of a language other than English do more harm than good when it comes to a child's acquisition of English (Cummins, 2000). Policies that exclude languages or that denigrate minority English dialects give children the impression that their languages or dialects are inferior. ELLs and dialect-minority students are left with a choice: reject their home language or reject English-only policies. They are told that a rejection of English-only policies will slow their English acquisition, but this is not so. Affirming a child's native language or dialect in school settings increases acceptance and acquisition of standard English (Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1996; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999). This is the sort of linguistic research that needs wider dissemination to counter the prevailing opinion that strict English-only policies are always sound policies. Unfortunately, linguistic insights do not always inform language policies and, as a result, detrimental language attitudes and policies persist.

To explain linguistic insights that are important for teachers, I will use a rhetorical strategy often used in religious services. Many religious leaders say that when they sermonize, they use two sources: a holy book and the newspaper. They try to relate profound theological ideas to everyday life. I will take a similar approach. I will "preach" some of the linguistic truths that have been discovered through research, and I will relate these to classrooms. I will present linguistic truths as well as how they are often misconstrued or simply ignored. My examples are drawn from newspapers, magazines, television shows, talk radio, and websites as well as personal conversations. These are the places where misconceptions are often spread. To be fair, there are articles in the press and popular media that accurately report on linguistic research; however, these articles will not be the focus in this book. Instead, the focus will be on the many reports that somehow get it wrong—the ones that distort information or leave out important parts and, in so doing, perpetuate misconceptions about language. The reports are not intentionally misleading; it is just that some myths and misconceptions about language are so entrenched that they surface in subtle and not so subtle ways. I highlight these quotes and

news reports in sections titled **Media Spotlight**. Popular misconceptions about language thrive in all of these settings. The opinions of the general public are vigorously applied in shaping our language policies. This can be a good thing or a bad thing. I have mentioned some bad examples, such as policies that restrict other languages in work places or schools. However, sometimes public opinion can have positive results as when some words are deemed racially offensive and are eliminated, almost by consensus, from public discourse. When public opinion is grounded in language misconceptions, this can be dangerous and lead to unnecessary changes in parenting strategies, new ineffectual educational policy, and even the perpetuation of attitudes that border on being racist. Unquestionably, ESL and mainstream teachers are among those on the front line when it comes to language issues, so it is imperative that they develop a clear understanding of language.

School systems expect teachers (both ESL and mainstream) to perform many vital functions relating to ELLs, such as teaching them English grammar and helping them gain content knowledge. However, Nancy Hornberger (2002) of the University of Pennsylvania has said that *advocacy* is the most basic function of a teacher of ELLs. By this she meant that teachers must advocate for these students in a school system that, while not intentionally hostile, is at the very least an alien place for them. This advocacy entails shepherding students in an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environment. This notion of advocacy needs to be taken a step further: Advocating for students also demands debunking linguistic misconceptions that lead to ill-formed policies that impede student success in U.S. schools. Teachers must be advocates for truth about language. Teacher advocacy can be as simple as explaining to administrators (and to the tax-weary public) how smaller class size for ESL classes aids acquisition, due to increased interaction with English, or explaining why strict English-only policies delay English acquisition. Administrators are not necessarily language experts, and teachers with a solid grasp of language can help them and other colleagues better understand language issues. Advocacy can also entail applying for educational grants for ESL programs and being able to articulate, based on research, how grant money can best be spent to aid ELLs.

Pre-service teachers in my classes who are new to the field of ESL often wonder why working with ELLs necessitates a background in linguistics. Some wonderful ESL teachers have enormous success in the classroom, yet they cannot tell a phoneme from a morpheme. However, while some linguistic terms may fade from these teachers' memories (Valdes, 2001), successful teachers understand language, and this understanding helps them when teaching verbs, idioms, and subject-verb agreement but also allows them to advocate for good language policies and raise their voice against detrimental ones.

While the spread of linguistic misconceptions continues, there is one piece of good news. Language has a life of its own. In spite of ill-formed policies based on false assumptions, language development continues, and students do acquire English. However, our uninformed linguistic tinkering may affect students' psyches, their attitudes toward learning English, and their academic success in an English environment, as this book will attest.

Humans develop their identity in and through language. We are not computers. We are emotional creatures, and developing a good sense of identity and belonging is key to emotional health. This sense of identity is intimately connected to language. We develop our identity in and through language. When someone criticizes our language or dialect, it is as though the attack is personal, and most people are quick to defend their own language and that of their community. Those who feel linguistically trampled will find vindication in the ideas presented in this book, I think.

The chapters of this book are organized by the topics and debates that are crucial around the world but in particular to the language/pedagogical situation in the United States. Chapter 1 provides some basic facts about language that are part of the canon of beliefs of linguists; however, many non-linguists disagree with them. While the assertions can and have been proven, they never seem to take root with the general public that is unaware of the research. There are too many erroneous stories in the news to indicate wide acceptance of these ideas. We develop ideas about people based on the clothes they wear, the way they walk, their hair style, and yes, the way they talk. We have heard time and again that

certain varieties of English are better and are more correct. Some linguists collect editorials in newspapers written by members of the general public that decry the “bad” dialects of English (Graddol, Leith, & Swann, 1996; Aitchison, 1991). These editorials erroneously use words such as *corrupt* and *broken* to describe certain dialects. We judge people according to the variety of language they use. While language can reveal much about a person, it has its limitations, and when these limitations are ignored, we stereotype based on language.

Chapter 2 addresses the misconceptions related to learning a first language, which is of particular importance to parents and early childhood educators. Parents want to do as much as possible to develop the language skills of their children, and teachers earnestly desire to continue this language development, but both groups often work under some illusions.

Chapter 3 confronts the myths about learning a second language. Since many adults and college graduates in the United States have taken a foreign language class, they have developed their own ideas about learning a second language. They have also listened to at least one or more foreign language teacher express his or her views on learning a new language. In my experience, foreign language teachers have often been the instigators when it comes to spreading misinformation about learning a second language.

Chapter 4 addresses how language and society interact. The chapter includes discussions about dialects and the movement in the United States to declare a national language. The possible movement to declare a national language is important for ESL teachers because they have opinions as to how such a law would affect ELLs.

Finally, Chapter 5 examines what we know about language and cognition. This is a complex and sometimes abstract topic and one that has its own sort of misconceptions. The questions addressed in the chapter include: How does language influence our thinking? Does “political correctness” prompt people to steer clear of discriminatory thinking through control of their language? Is swearing ruining language and our morality?

Each chapter begins with a quote or quotes about language. These quotes introduce the topic of the chapter and also set a certain tone about the truths and myths that will be explored. Each chapter concludes with activities for teachers that give examples, exercises, or simple questions that relate directly to the ESL field and, in particular, to teachers' everyday dealings with ELLs and language. These activities are intended to stir reactions and be a focus for discussion and reflection about the issues presented in each chapter. A list of resources that may be useful for students and teachers in their quest to understand language follows.

There is one inherent danger in writing a book like this: spreading a false notion about language even as I attempt to clarify linguistic information. However, I am careful to point out research that supports my assertions.

Languages do indeed have a life of their own, but the attitudes we have toward languages profoundly influences what we think of those we hear speaking. Grammatical acumen is not a requirement for linguistic study, but serious self-reflection is. Despite being in the field of linguistics for a number of years, I too still fall prey to misconceptions. Despite how much I read and understand about language, I too sometimes make judgments that I know I should not. For instance, recently I went to a store to pick up film that I had left for processing and there was a problem with the film. I heard two of the film processors talking, and I hoped the one whose dialect I liked better would help me. After all, it meant he knew more about film . . . didn't it?