

Language Myths

edited by Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill
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Misguided beliefs about language are widely held throughout society, particularly the common misconception that some languages are inferior to others, and this book takes a careful look at twenty-one such issues. Each chapter addresses one myth, and each one is written by a different author, including a distinguished array of experts such as Peter Roach, Jean Aitchison, Jenny Cheshire, J. K. Chambers and Janet Holmes, so all the issues are tackled with immense authority.

The text throughout is written with highly commendable clarity. In the Introduction (p. xv), the editors bemoan the fact that so much of the literature in linguistics is impenetrable for non-specialists, and very few professional linguists have done anything to explain our work to the general public. One purpose of this book is to counter this trend, a goal which it achieves by providing plenty of interesting material that is easy to read but at the same time is backed by substantial expertise.

Apart from ensuring that all the material is presented in accessible language, the editors have allowed the individual authors considerable leeway in how to approach their chosen topic, and this results in some overlap between the chapters. In particular, quite a few address the same underlying theme, that all languages and varieties of language are equally well suited to their purpose, so for example Myth 2 attacks the prejudice that some languages are not good enough, Myth 4 deals with the misconception that French is more logical than other languages, Myth 10 discusses the absurd claim that some languages have no grammar, Myth 11 considers the widely-held belief that certain languages are inherently beautiful while others are ugly and concludes that this is purely a result of our social conditioning, Myth 13 looks at the rich oral tradition of Black children in the United States in order to dispel the view that such children are linguistically deprived, and Myth 19 clearly refutes the claim that Australian Aborigine languages are primitive. A closely related theme addressed by some chapters is the belief that standards of language are deteriorating in the modern age, with Myth 3 considering if it is true that the media is ruining English, and Myth 8 looking at whether it is really the case that children cannot write properly any more. This overlap in the coverage of the various chapters sometimes involves repetition of material, such as the two separate references to Margaret Thatcher saying "It's not for you and I to condemn the Malawi economy" (p. 17 & p. 100). However, in most cases such overlap actually proves to be complementary rather than just repetitive, and as a result the chapters constitute a rich mosaic of inter-related themes which are always both illuminating and entertaining.

One wonders how many of us, even those with a solid background in linguistics, are free from some of these widespread prejudices. Personally, I get irritated by the hypercorrect use of the subjective case pronoun in phrases like "between you and I", so it was a salutary lesson to find that it was used not just by the normally punctilious Mrs Thatcher but also by Shakespeare, with Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* saying "All debts are cleared between you and I" (p. 16). Maybe I should learn to be less critical when I encounter such instances. Furthermore, how many of us really believe that all languages are equally beautiful? And how many of us are truly convinced that there has been no deterioration in both the written and spoken language of young people in recent years? After all, we see the writing of students every day, and it clearly seems to be getting worse and worse. Everyone knows this, so it must be true, surely!

We all have a lot to learn from this richly entertaining book, though inevitably some of the chapters will be more successful than others in rebutting their respective myths, partly as a result of the commendable degree of stylistic variation permitted between the different authors. While Myth 10 that some languages have no grammar is clearly shown to be ludicrous, and Myth 14 that double negatives are illogical is quite effectively refuted by reference to French and also the language of Shakespeare ("nor never none shall mistress be of it, save I alone", *Twelfth Night* III.i) (p. 120), a few chapters leave the reader rather more uncertain. Myth 7 that some languages are harder than others concludes that in certain respects some languages may, in fact, be more difficult (p. 56), and Myth 5 that English spelling is chaotic tries to give an overview of all the factors that contribute to the way English is written, and this heroic attempt to cover the topic in just nine pages is likely to leave most readers even more convinced that English spelling is indeed a mess! Finally Myth 15 argues that there is little influence from TV on our pronunciation, but many readers in Singapore may remain unconvinced by this, for if the gradual but clear shift among young Singaporeans towards a rhotic accent (with the use of an /r/ in words like four) does not come from the influence of American TV, films and music, then where does it come from? But it is inevitable, and even desirable, that people can maintain a degree of skepticism when reading this material, as some of the issues really are not so straightforward that they allow a simple answer.

In conclusion, this book is both informative and entertaining, with much to teach all of us, and it should provide plenty of food for thought for laymen and experienced linguists alike.