

Language in Society

Style, Slang, and Jargon

Style

People usually speak two or more dialects of their own language. They talk one way with their friends, and they talk in a different way in a job interview, or when talking to small children. These situation dialects are called styles. Almost everyone has a formal and informal style. The informal style is characterized by the use of contractions, and the use of different words than those that occur in the formal style. Most speakers are able to use a number of different styles, ranging between the two extremes of formal and informal.

There are rules of social behavior that govern the style in many cultures. An example of this exists in French and German where there is a distinction between “you familiar” and “you polite.” German *du* and French *tu* are used only with intimates; *sie* and *vous* are more formal and used with non-intimates.

Slang

The use of slang is considered as a mark of informal style. All people use slang in particular occasions. The use of slang introduces many new words into the language by recombining old words into new meanings, e.g., spaced out, right on, hangup, and rip-off. In rare cases, slang will come up with an entirely new word for the language, such as *barf*, and *flub*. In addition, slang consists of using old words with totally new meanings. For example, *Grass* and *pot* have widened their meaning to *marijuana*. Some slang words have not gained total acceptability, but others have come regular words like *dwindle*, *freshman*, *glib*, and *mob*. However, it is not always easy to draw the line between slang words and regular words. Also, some words are not considered slang by some people, but are by others like *hippie*, and different regions have different slangs.

Jargon

Almost every profession, trade occupation and science has its own set of words. Depending on the status of the people using them, some of these words are considered to be slang, while others are considered technical. Such words are called jargon or argot. Linguistic jargon consists of terms such as phoneme, morpheme, and lexicon. Many jargon terms pass into the standard language and become used and understood by many people like some

slang words. Sometimes these words may lose their status as jargon or slang and enter the formal usage. An example of this is the French word *tete* "head". It used to be slang, but now it is an ordinary word.

Taboo or Not Taboo

How can a language be clean or dirty? The filth or beauty of language is in the ear of the beholder, or in the collective ear of society. There is nothing about a particular string of sounds which makes it clean or dirty. For example, the word *prick* in the context "I pricked my finger when sewing" is normal, but the same word is considered dirty when used to refer to someone.

A word like *prick* is considered a taboo. Taboo means words that should not be used, or at least, not to be used in a polite society. Originally, the word taboo is borrowed from Tongan, a Polynesian language, where it refers to acts that are forbidden, and later reference to such acts also became forbidden.

These forbidden acts and words reflect the customs of the society. Some words can be used in certain circumstances and not in others. Also, in certain societies, words which have religious connotations are considered profane if used outside religious ceremonies. Christians are forbidden to "take the Lord's name in vain" and this has been extended to the use of curses. As a result *hell* and *damn* are changed to *heck* and *darn*. The word *bloody* is a taboo word in England, and it is used only by the lowest of classes. Some people suggest that it is a taboo because it refers to the blood of Christ. However, this origin is not certain, and this shows how people who use these words do not know why they are taboo, they only know that they are.

In many cultures, the large part of taboo words consists of words related to sex, sex organs, and natural bodily functions. Some languages have no native words to mean "sexual intercourse" and they borrow such words from neighboring people. Sometimes, two words can have the same linguistic meaning and one can be acceptable for use and the other strictly forbidden. There is no reason why the word *vagina* is "clean" while *cunt* is "dirty", or why *prick* or *cock* is taboo, but *penis* is considered as referring to part of the male anatomy.

The existence of taboos words stimulates the creation of euphemism, which is a word that replaces a taboo word, or which is used to avoid fearful or unpleasant subjects. For

example, there are a number of euphemisms which have been created to deal with the subject of death. People say *pass on* or *pass away* instead of *die*.

Language and Sexism

Language use reflects the views and values of society. Also, words of a language cannot be either good or bad but can only be considered that way by the people who use them. One word may have positive connotations, while another word with the identical linguistic meaning may have negative connotations. For instance, a woman may be referred to as a castrating female or as a courageous feminist advocate.

A lot of people believe that the language we use is affected by the values of society. This is clear regarding how the issue of sexism in society is reflected in language. Just as language cannot be dirty in itself, also it cannot be sexist. However, it can reflect sexist attitudes.

When someone says *my cousin is a professor* (or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a CPA, or the chancellor of the university) most people would conclude that the cousin was a man. This has nothing to do with the English language, but has a great deal to do with the fact that historically women have not been prominent in these professions. On the other hand, if someone says *my cousin is a nurse* (elementary school teacher, clerk-typist, model, or prostitute) people would conclude that the cousin was a woman. Also, if someone says *my neighbor is a blond*, the hearer will conclude that the neighbor is a woman. This could be due to the fact that the physical characteristics of women assume greater importance than those of men because women are constantly exploited as sex objects.

Another point is that when there are male/female pairs, the male form is unmarked for the most part, and the female form is created by adding a bound morpheme or by compounding, for example: prince and princess, count and countess, host and hostess. People talk of a *male nurse* because it is expected that a nurse will be female. Other examples are *lady doctor*, and *woman athlete*.

The unmarked, or male nouns, also serve as the general term, just like the male pronouns. The *brotherhood of man* includes women, but *sisterhood* does not include men. However, at the University of California, they are using terms such as *chairperson*, and *freshperson*. Such changes in the language are taking place and reflect the growing consciousness of sexism in society.