Dec-2003

Cultural Commentary: Bridgewater Students Look at Language

Barbara Apstein

Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Students in Linguistics and History of the English Language classes are required to keep journals in which they record observations about the language around them. At the beginning, some students are not sure what kind of observations to make—although they use language all the time, they’ve never analyzed it before. After a while, they get the idea and begin to enjoy the project. What emerges is a portrait of contemporary language use from the vantage point of southeastern Massachusetts.

TONIC, JIMMIES AND LIQUID CABINETS

Vocabulary is the first aspect of language most students notice. ‘Tonic,’ in Massachusetts, means ‘soda’; ‘jimmies’ refers to the black chocolatey sprinkles tossed over ice cream. A ‘bubbler’ is a water fountain. In the fall of 2003, when the Red Sox battled the Yankees in the American League playoffs, the ‘curse’ (shorthand for the legendary curse of the Bambino) was a constant source of anxiety, and ‘cowboy up’ was adopted as a rallying cry for the ever-hopeful Sox fans.

Rhode Island appears to have its own regional vocabulary. In that state, according to a student raised in Providence, a ‘cabinet’ is a type of drink consisting of milk, ice cream, and syrup all mixed together in a blender (or ‘blenda’ as the natives like to call it). In addition, “some people refer to the topping that we put on spaghetti as ‘sauce,’ while we call it ‘gravy.’”

THE GENERATION GAP

Age-specific vocabulary elicited another set of examples, with some youthful members of the class politely critical of their elders for using outdated terminology. “My grandmother dresses nicely and is very up-to-date,” one student noted; “but she still says ‘dungarees’ and ‘slacks’ instead of ‘jeans’ and ‘pants.’” Another student, a parent, described a linguistic misunderstanding with her teen-age son. After she had presented him with a new Adidas sweatshirt, the young man exclaimed: “That’s nasty!” The mother, disappointed, asked, “You don’t like it?” When the son answered: “It’s sweet, mom, you know, phat,” his mother finally realized that he loved the sweatshirt. Other students reported that, in the context of athletics, words like ‘nasty’ often have a positive denotation. “‘Bad,’ ‘sick,’ ‘gross,’ ‘ridiculous,’ ‘retarded,’ and ‘filthy’ can all be terms of praise, believe it or not,” one sports fan observed. Thus, someone watching a basketball game might say a particularly nice dunk is ‘sick’ or ‘nasty.’

“I’M SO OUT OF HERE.”

Many other examples of teen-age slang, much of it derived from rap and hip-hop, were recorded in the journals. Often, as with ‘nasty,’ commonly-used words have acquired new meanings. Teenagers refer to one another (affectionately) as ‘dog’ (alternative spellings: ‘dogg’ and ‘dawg’); “That’s my dawg” is a phrase used by young men to denote a friend. On the other-hand, “He’s such a dog” is a term used by women when they think that a guy is being mean or a jerk. “What’s chillin’?” means “What’s happening?” Other current slang expressions include “I’m so out of here” and “She is way [much] smarter.” New words have also been invented, as in the sentence “I hope I get some phat bling bling [good jewelry] for my birthday” or “The commuter caf serves gnarly [bad] coffee.”

SWEAR WORDS

Several students observed that traditionally taboo words have entered the conversational mainstream. For example, “historically the term ‘nigger’ is derogatory and used as an insult, but today many blacks use the word among themselves all the time.” ‘Bitch’ has also evolved: one student commented that “in the early ‘90s, young girls began calling themselves ‘bitch’ and scrawling the word on their bodies. Taking away the stigma attached and using the term in a positive way negates the original intent.” Another shift in the meaning of ‘bitch’ was illustrated by a student who recounted a request made by a Coast Guard employee to a co-worker, both being male: “Can you get those reports to me today? C’mon, you’re my number one bitch in Maine.” ‘Bitch’ in this instance means ‘work slave.’ It’s clear that ‘bitch’ is no longer applied exclusively to women and is no longer necessarily an insult.
PEOPLE FROM DORCHESTA PREFER CHOWDAH

Venturing outside New England made many students aware of their Boston accents. One member of the class learned that eastern New Englanders are famous throughout the nation for what linguists refer to as the loss of postvocalic ‘r,’ that is, omission of the ‘r’ sound when it is not followed by a vowel, in words like ‘car’ and ‘barn.’ During a visit to Florida, this young woman went into a department store looking for boxer shorts. The store clerk nodded, disappeared into the storage area, and returned a few minutes later with a box of shot glasses. “With my accent,” the embarrassed student realized, “he thought that I had asked for a box of shots, not boxer shorts.”

In another incident involving pronunciation misunderstanding, a student who was sitting with friends in a club noticed that a drink had been spilled on a nearby chair. Seeing that a young man was about to sit down, the student warned him: “don’t sit down because you’ll get your khakis [i.e., pants] dirty.” The response from the stranger was a puzzled look: “he thought I was referring to his ‘car keys.’” For the stranger, clearly a New Englander, ‘car keys’ rhymes with ‘khakis.’

UNDERSTANDING FOREIGN SPEAKERS: JUDGMENTS AND MISJUDGMENTS

One of the central concepts of modern linguistics is the idea of mental grammar, the innate, largely unconscious knowledge of the rules of our language. This unconscious knowledge, much of which we acquire before the age of five, allows us to compose and to understand an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences we have never heard before. It means that we know, if we are English speakers, that “There’s a large insect in the bathtub” is a grammatical sentence, while “Insect large there’s a bathtub in the” is not, even if we cannot explain why.

The concept of mental grammar helped the class understand that the errors made by foreign speakers often result from their application of the rules of their native tongues to English. Thus a student who worked in a convenience store noted that her Portuguese-speaking customers sometimes asked “Can I pay this here?” The Portuguese phrasal verb “pagar,” she learned, means “to pay for”; thus, the omission of “for,” while grammatically incorrect in English, would appear logical to the Portuguese speaker. Another set of errors was traced to the fact that Portuguese lacks the auxiliar verbs ‘do’ and ‘don’t’ and that Portuguese speakers use intonation to indicate that they are asking a question. Knowledge of these rules made it clear that the Portuguese mother-in-law who asked “Why you no come to see me more often?” was following the rules of her native language and that her mistakes were consistent with those rules.

An understanding of mental grammar and of the fact that we unconsciously follow the many complex rules of our mother tongue helps students avoid common prejudices based on accents and mispronunciations. One student confessed to having been guilty of stereotyping:

I hate to admit it, but I had the tendency to assume that people who did not speak English well were in some way clueless, unaware of things that were going on. For some reason, I would never try to joke or attempt small talk with people who came into my store who had obvious difficulty with the English language.

During the course of the semester I began to make an effort to converse with some of these customers whom I had barely spoken to before, aside from telling them the amount of their purchase. I’m ashamed that it took me so long to realize how condescending I had actually been to assume that they couldn’t respond to humor and friendliness because their English vocabulary and grammar were limited.

Analyzing the conversations going on around them, gathering material for their language journals, many students discovered that, to paraphrase the saying attributed to renowned philosopher Yogi Berra, “You can hear a lot by just listening.”

—Barbara Apstein is Professor of English and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review