PennState
Center *for* Language Science

Newsletter

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BILINGUALISM MATTERS at PENN STATE

Letter from the editors

Dear friends,

This issue of our Center for Language Science/Bilingualism Matters at Penn State newsletter is centered around the question: *Is there a correct way to speak?* The topic of language "correctness" is relevant to many aspects of civic life, from education and schooling, to the workplace, the judicial system, and beyond. And while a popular societal view is that there is only one correct way to speak, decades of linguistic research have revealed complex patterns of linguistic diversity that suggest otherwise. In this issue we aim to provide just a taste of the rich and varied patterns that exist in natural language, and to illustrate some of the ways in which language scientists have approached studying them. As you read through the pieces in this issue, you will probably recognize many of the patterns we describe, and you may even consider some of them "incorrect". What we hope to show is that, when examined a bit more closely, these diverse patterns reveal just how remarkable and interesting human language is, and that language diversity is truly something to be celebrated. As always, we welcome your feedback, and we hope you'll enjoy this issue.

Sincerely,
Frances Blanchette, Olivia Barnum, Trevor Bero, Cole Callen, Carlos Echeverría, Katherine Kerschen, Javier López Seoane, and Catherine Pham

Envision 2020:
STEM Career Day Supporting Young Women
Through hands-on activities, high school students explored what it means to be a language scientist!

Inside this issue:

Rethinking **RULES** : A Quiz About Language Diversity

By Trevor Bero and Catherine Pham

Take the quiz below to learn about how the rules of English have changed over time, and how the rules may actually be different depending on where you are and who you're talking to.

1. For each word in bold below, choose the version of the past tense that you would use in conversation.

burn	**learn**	**leap**
a. burned	a. learned	a. leaped
b. burnt	b. learnt	b. leapt

Depending on where you're from and the social groups you belong to, you may have a different opinion on which of these verbs is "correct." For example, while *learned* is often used as the past tense of *learn* in both American and Canadian English, English speakers in other parts of the world may prefer *learnt*. The fact that both versions are considered "correct" by different groups shows that our notions of correctness are more opinion than fact. Languages have lots of diversity, and there's often more than one way to say things correctly!

2. Imagine you have a question for someone:

   a. Do you **ask** them?   OR   b. Do you **aks** them?

The second pronunciation (which sounds like *axe*) is often considered "incorrect" in present day American English. But did you know that this is actually how this word was pronounced in Old English (c.500 – c.1100)? This means that if we were living in the year 600, for example, we would actually consider *aks* the correct pronunciation, whereas *ask* would be considered incorrect. This shows how our notions of what is correct can change over time, and further reinforces the idea that there's often more than one way to speak "correctly."

3. Fill in the following blanks with <u>a. nothing</u> or <u>b. anything</u>

   I don't know _____.   Don't tell me _____.   It don't mean _____.

If you chose a. nothing to complete any of the phrases, English grammar teachers would likely admonish you for using a "double negative." However, these types of phrases are found in many dialects of English, and in popular culture, as in the Rolling Stones' famous refrain "I can't get no satisfaction." Interestingly, much like the *ask* vs. *aks* alternation we discussed above, "double negatives" were considered correct throughout much of the history of English: Even William Shakespeare used them, and certainly he wasn't making no mistakes!

4. Your friends want you to go see a movie with them tomorrow, but you haven't decided if you're going. What would you say to them?

    a. I might go to the movies with you tomorrow.

    b. I might could go to the movies with you tomorrow.

While most American English speakers would choose option a, some American English speakers (especially in the south) might choose option b. This is an example of a "double modal" sentence, where two modal verbs such as *can*, *could*, *might*, or *should* are used one after another. Interestingly, sentences a and b might not be used in exactly the same way in conversation: Linguists have observed that in some cases, double modals like b can be used when the speaker wants to be especially polite.

5. After a long, brutal Pennsylvanian winter, you look at your car and realize how dirty it is. Which of the options below would you say?

    a. This car needs to be washed.

    b. This car needs washed.

    c. This car needs washing.

Of the three, options a and c are the ones that the majority of English speakers would say. But in many parts of the US, including parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Indiana, speakers commonly use phrases like *needs washed* in b as well. And like the other examples mentioned above, we know that this way of speaking is as rule-based and systematic as any other, so it doesn't need corrected at all!

We hope you enjoyed taking this quiz, and perhaps even found some new perspective on how fun and interesting grammar can be. You may have been struck by how many different sets of rules and patterns can co-exist within the same language. This quiz just barely scratches the surface of the grammatical diversity that exists in English. As linguists and language scientists, we think that figuring out what the different rules and diverse patterns of language are, and where they come from, is one of the things that makes the study of language so interesting. If you're interested and would like to learn more about grammatical diversity, consider checking out some of these additional resources:

- *New York Times American Dialect Quiz*: How Y'all, Youse and You Guys Talk. This survey takes you through a series of questions about how you use language in order to guess the region of the United States that you're from. Try it and you'll probably be amazed at how accurate it is!

- *Yale Grammatical Diversity Project*: https://ygdp.yale.edu/. This site includes an interactive map of the United States that takes you on a tour through different grammatical structures unique to particular regions. If you took the quiz above, some of the structures will seem very familiar!

- *Scots Syntax Atlas*: https://scotssyntaxatlas.ac.uk/. This interactive site takes you on a linguistic tour of Scotland. Listen to a range of different Scottish accents and learn about the different grammatical structures unique to particular regions of Scotland.

- *The Grammar of Double Negatives – a TEDxPSU talk by Dr. Frances Blanchette*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV0IirfzUK0. This short and engaging video talks about the controversial "double negative" structure. Check it out with an open mind, and you may even change your perspective on "double negatives"!

Language, Correctness, and Rules: Lessons from Linguistic Diversity

By Carlos Echeverría, Katherine Kerschen, and Javier López Seoane

When we hear words like *language* and *grammar*, we tend to think of rules or norms that we're supposed to follow in order to speak "correctly." For example, we think about the correct past tense form of *go* being *went* and not *goed*. Ideas of correctness in language are sometimes referred to as *linguistic prescriptivism*. One of the most important contributions of modern linguistics has been the notion that there is value in studying languages as they are actually spoken, by kids, adults, and everyone in between. In fact, from a linguist's perspective, cases that are considered incorrect can often be the most interesting to study. In this research summary, we present a couple of examples to show how aspects of language that may be considered incorrect are actually quite systematic and follow their own sets of rules.

To "be" or not to "be"

The verb *be* is among the most common verbs in the English language, and when we look at how it's used across different dialects or varieties, we see that it's also one of the most interesting. In the following sentence, this verb is used in the present tense (as the form *is*):

> I know, but he <u>is</u> wild, though.

In some English varieties, another way to say the same sentence would be like this:[1]

> I know, but he wild, though.

In this version, the verb *be* appears to be missing, and yet the sentence has basically the same meaning as the one above. Are speakers making mistakes when they appear to omit *be* like this? While some English teachers might say yes, decades of linguistic research have shown that these omissions are not mistakes at all. In fact, when we look a bit more closely, we find that these speakers are actually following very particular rules and patterns for when *be* must be included, and when it does not need to be.

Researcher Toya Wyatt has shown that, from as early as preschool, many African American children already display knowledge of rules and shared patterns for when *be* must be used, and when they can say a sentence without it.[2] For example, she finds a tendency for *be*-less sentences where the verb would follow a pronoun (e.g., *she*, *he*, *they*). However, when the subject is a full name like *Mary* or a longer phrase like *the teacher*, children prefer to include the verb *be*. So their sentences might look like this:

> "Mary <u>is</u> happy today."
> "She happy today."

Wyatt also found that when the children were talking about the past, they almost always included *be*:

> "Mary <u>was</u> happy yesterday." ✓
> "Mary happy yesterday." X

What's remarkable is that kids are learning these shared patterns and rules before they even get to school. So while their teachers may encourage them to use *be* all the time when they're at school, when we look closely at how they use this verb in more natural conversation, we can clearly see that they are working with a well-developed linguistic system. In other words, they are not simply making mistakes!

Bilingual codeswitching

Another language feature that sometimes gets called incorrect is *codeswitching*, which happens when bilingual speakers switch back and forth between languages in the same conversation or even the same sentence. For example, in Quebec, Canada, you might hear a speaker switching back and forth between French and English like this:[3]

> I called him and you know, asked him to go over and get me *deux chiens-chauds, tout garnis*.
> (Translation: I called him and you know, asked him to go over and get me two hotdogs, all dressed.)

While some may look at codeswitching as an incorrect and even haphazard way of speaking, research has shown that this kind of speech is very systematic, and it even follows particular patterns and rules.

To understand how codeswitching is systematic, let's look at an example with switching between English and Spanish. Both of these languages have short words like *the*, *a*, and *an*, called *determiners*, which come before nouns (e.g., *the car*, *an apple*). In Spanish, like in many other languages, determiners come with a gender (feminine or masculine) attached to them. For instance, in Spanish *the car* is <u>el</u> *coche*, which is masculine, while *the table is* <u>la</u> *mesa*, which is feminine.

Now here comes the cool part: in codeswitched speech, speakers tend to have specific preferences for what gender a Spanish determiner should be, even when it precedes an English noun! Here's an example of a Spanish-English code-switched sentence from a bilingual community in Miami:[4]

> *Pero no tenían el* flag out there?
> (Translation: But didn't they have the flag out there?)

This example contains the codeswitched phrase *el flag*, with a Spanish determiner (*el*) and an English noun (*flag*). Because Spanish determiners mark gender but English ones do not, with switches like this it seems that the speaker has a decision to make: Should the determiner be masculine or feminine? If codeswitching were haphazard, then we would see lots of randomness in people's decisions. But, importantly, research has shown that in situations like this, speakers are actually choosing the gender of determiners quite systematically. For example, one study by Jorge Valdés Kroff showed that speakers tend to choose masculine determiners to modify English nouns, even when the Spanish equivalent of the noun is feminine.[5] So while codeswitching might at first glance seem haphazard, there are clear and discernible patterns to the switching, and knowledge of these patterns seems to be shared within codeswitching communities.

Conclusion

With the examples above we hope to have provided a slightly different perspective on language rules from the one you may have been taught in grammar school. When we look a bit more closely at language features that are perceived to be incorrect or random, we find patterns that suggest people are following rules when using these features. Most remarkably, these are rules that they did not learn in school, but that they deduced by themselves just from listening and talking to each other.

While prescriptive rules can no doubt be useful, for instance for language teaching, what's considered correct from a prescriptive point of view is often arbitrary. Moreover, even when speakers do not adhere to what's typically considered correct, they still tend to adopt distinct rules and patterns in their speech, be it in their use of a particular verb or when switching between two languages. In other words, "incorrect" doesn't necessarily mean chaotic, and this is a lesson that's best learned by looking at actual language use.

Featured Partner:

Karen Miller, PhD

Professor of Spanish and Linguistics and Co-Director of the Center for Language Science at Penn State

Interviewed by Cole Callen

Could you briefly summarize the research you have been focusing on most recently at Penn State?

In my research I investigate the relationship between the kinds of input children receive—what they hear from their caregivers and others they interact with—and how this input relates to the kinds of language they produce. By comparing what kids hear with what they produce in the short and long term, my goal is to better understand what is happening when kids are acquiring language. I think it's really important to consider the social context kids are embedded in when they're acquiring language.

An interesting aspect of adult speech is that it's highly variable, meaning that adults often say the same thing in different ways, including when talking to kids. I'm particularly interested in when speakers vary between "standard" or prescriptively correct forms and more vernacular forms that might be considered incorrect (e.g., they might use sentences like 'I didn't eat anything' and also 'I didn't eat nothing', in similar contexts). I'm interested in how this kind of variable input impacts how kids acquire language. This line of research has broader relevance for fields like education and speech-language pathology, where it's important to be able to support young children from under-represented groups whose caregivers may use lots of vernacular forms.

What are some methods you use to study child language acquisition?

In my research I spend a lot of time studying and analyzing conversations between children and their caregivers. I also look at how adults talk to each other in these contexts, to better understand the kinds of things kids might be hearing when they're listening to adult conversations. In my lab I do different kinds of experiments, including tracking children's eye movements while they're listening to speech and looking at pictures, or having them act out or repeat things.

Some people may think that children learn to speak the same as their parents. To what extent is that true?

In the work that I do, I have found that children tend to match the different patterns found in their caregivers' speech by around 4-5 years of age. This means that kids must be listening very closely and picking up on all sorts of things!

Can you think of any common misconceptions about how children acquire language? What research is there to debunk those assumptions?

I think a common misconception is that it is difficult for children to learn more than one language at a time, or that it is difficult for them to learn to read and write in more than one language at a time. Research with bilingual children from different language backgrounds has shown that, when given the right resources, children can actually learn to do these things quite well.[1]

Finally, could you tell us about your experience as a mother in a bilingual household, particularly through the lens of a researcher concerned with child language acquisition? Are there any scientific facts you consider particularly relevant for bilingual parents to keep in mind?

Studies have indicated that the one-parent, one-language technique, where each parent uses a different language at home, is helpful for raising bilingual children. However, what we do in our house in practice and what the research shows is generally very different. This is because it's often been challenging for us to monitor our use of language on a day-to-day basis. In our house, we tend to use English in some contexts and Spanish in others. However, both my spouse and I are bilingual in both languages and so we speak both to our children and sometimes we code-switch, using a mixture of both languages in the same context. We also travel to Chile almost every summer. During that time, our kids are using more Spanish (with their family in Chile), and their skills in the language increase quite a bit. We are not strict on which language to use. I find that the use of one language over the other changes depending on where we are, who we are talking with, and what we are talking about.

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From pp. 4-5
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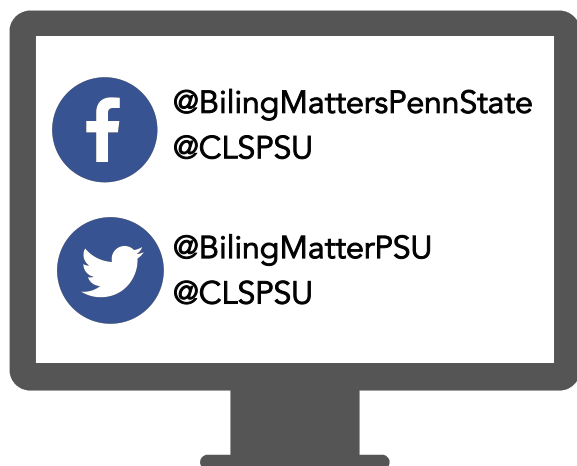
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The Penn State **Center for Language Science (CLS)** is an interdisciplinary research group of linguists, psycholinguists, applied linguists, speech-language pathologists, speech scientists, and cognitive neuroscientists who share an interest in language acquisition and bilingualism.

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