
Linguistic cleanliness is next to godliness: taboo and purism

KATE BURRIDGE

An overview of prescriptivism in relation to public perceptions of and reaction to language use

Introduction¹

This paper explores popular perceptions of language, in particular linguistic prescription. It focuses not on formal acts of censorship such as might be carried out by a language academy, but on the attitudes and activities of ordinary people in, say, letters to newspapers or comments on radio. In these contexts, language users act as self-appointed censors and take it upon themselves to condemn those words and constructions that they feel do not measure up to the standards they perceive should hold sway.

People's concerns about language and the kind of linguistic censorship and puristic activities that accompany them belong to our tabooing behaviour generally. Prescriptive practices are part of the human struggle to control unruly nature – in this case, to define language and to force the reality of 'the boundless chaos of a living speech' (as Samuel Johnson put it in his Preface) into neat classificatory systems. As with tabooing practices generally, linguistic purists see a very clear distinction between what is clean and what is dirty – in this case, what is desirable and undesirable in a language. Linguists who challenge these prescriptions are challenging their 'cherished classifications'. Small wonder there is often such a schism between linguistics and the wider community.

Setting the scene – taboo and linguistic purism

The English word *taboo* derives from Tongan *tabu*. It entered the language towards the end of the 18th century. In this context the word refers generally to forbidden behaviour and

includes such things as bans on naming dangerous animals, food restrictions, prohibitions on touching or talking to members of high social classes and injunctions to do with aspects of birth, death and bodily functions. Taboo items are avoided because they are thought to be ominous or evil or somehow offensive to supernatural powers. To violate a taboo automatically causes harm (even death) to the violator and perhaps his or her fellows. However, taboos do not always involve the possibility of physical or metaphysical injury. Old Polynesia also has evidence of the sorts of taboos on bad manners with which readers will be more familiar; in other words, social sanctions placed on behaviour that is regarded as distasteful or at least impolite within a given social context (cf. Allan & BurrIDGE, 2006: Chapter 1). The taboos of contemporary



KATE BURRIDGE is both Professor and Chair of Linguistics in the Linguistics Program at Monash University. Her main areas of research are: grammatical change in Germanic languages; the Pennsylvania German spoken by Amish / Mennonite communities in

Canada; the notion of linguistic taboo; the structure and history of English. She is the author of 'Gift of the Gob: Morsels of English Language History', co-author, with Keith Allan, of 'Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language', and with Kersti Borjars, of 'Introducing English Grammar', and is also a regular presenter of language segments on ABC Radio and television. Email: kate.burrIDGE@arts.monash.edu.au

doi:10.1017/S0266078410000027

English Today 102, Vol. 26, No. 2 (June 2010). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2010 Cambridge University Press

3

Western society are of this nature. They rest ultimately on traditions of etiquette and are intimately linked with social organisation. A taboo word in a language such as modern-day English is avoided, not because of any fear that harm may befall either the speaker or the audience, but lest the speaker lose face by offending the sensibilities of the audience. Some speakers would claim that to utter taboo terms offends their own sensibilities, because of the supposed unpleasantness or ugliness of the taboo terms themselves. In this context euphemism is the polite thing to do, and dysphemism (or offensive language) is little more than the breaking of a social convention. However, as social beings, humans can ill afford to violate social conventions without suffering adverse sanctions. We therefore censor our behaviour so as to avoid giving offence except when we deliberately intend to offend.

Verbal taboos directly serve human interests by setting apart those things that threaten to cause distress and offence. Many of them have a rational basis but they will also persist even when people are unaware of the reasons that might have led to their establishment. Much of the time it is routine that ensures the continuance of linguistic sanctions. Taboos also increase group identity through feelings of distinctiveness (what one group spurns, another holds dear), while the rites and rituals that accompany them give us a sense of control in a chaotic, potentially hostile, environment. When old taboos are jettisoned, people grow anxious that disorder is setting in.

Like tabooing behaviour generally, linguistic purism seeks to constrain the conduct of individuals by identifying certain elements in a language as 'bad'. Typically, these are words and word usage that are believed to threaten the identity of the culture in question – what eighteenth-century grammarians referred to as the 'genius' of the language.² Authenticity has two faces: one is the struggle to arrest linguistic change and to retain the language in its perceived traditional form; the other is to rid the language of unwanted elements and to protect it from foreign influences. But, as Cameron (1995) has claimed, the prescriptive endeavours of speakers are more complex and diverse than this. She prefers the expression 'verbal hygiene' over 'prescription' or 'purism' for exactly this reason. According to Cameron, a sense of linguistic values makes verbal hygiene part of every speaker's linguistic com-

petence, as basic to language as vowels and consonants. The 2004 'Runaway number one British Bestseller', *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: the Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, is recent evidence of this. This amusing punctuation guide has been met by prayers of thanks by verbal hygienists the world over. They are the people found in those language associations formed to promote causes as diverse as Plain English, spelling reform, Esperanto, Klingon, assertiveness and effective communication – even something as esoteric as the preservation of Old English strong verbs and the abolition of the aberrant apostrophe. Verbal hygienists also enjoy thinking and arguing about words, correcting the writing of others and looking things up in dictionaries and usage guides. These activities are born of a fascination for language, but also the urge to improve it and clean it up.

Such activities have to do with the solidarity and separating function of language and, like other tabooing practices, they help to define the group. They are all about social status, too. Speakers constantly make negative judgments about others who use vocabulary, grammar and accent that they view as bad English, castigating such people as 'uneducated', even 'stupid'. The behaviour seems out of character for an era that is so obsessed with equality for all and the desire not to offend – indeed, a time when the new taboos are legally recognised sanctions against what might be dubbed *-IST language* (sexist, racist, ageist, religionist, etc. language). The basic human right of respect is understood to mean that people can no longer speak of or to others in terms that are considered insulting and demeaning and there is a new apprehensiveness and shunning of anything that may be interpreted as discriminatory or pejorative. Yet somehow this behaviour does not extend to the way people talk about the language skills of others. Linguistic prejudices are usually accepted without challenge. Despite the profession of egalitarianism, conscious and unconscious discrimination against speakers of non-standard dialects and low-status accents is rampant.

Public opinions on language

My views on popular perceptions of language have been shaped by published letters to editors and also personal letters, emails and general

feedback I have received over many years of public lectures (for schools, festivals, charities and a range of societies and institutions). The remarks are also informed by more than sixteen years involvement with the ABC (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation), preparing and presenting weekly programs on language for radio and television. Currently, I am involved in at least two weekly radio pieces (one syndicated written piece on some aspect of language and one talkback program where members of the public phone into the radio station and put directly on air their observations on language and queries about usage). I also present a weekly language spot on the ABC TV show 'Can We Help' (<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/canwehelp/>) where I try to answer viewers' questions about language. Many of these have to do with etymology, but like those of the talkback callers, they are also often complaints about the language of others; i.e. observations on what is viewed as bad grammar, sloppy pronunciations, new-fangled words, vulgar colloquialisms, unwanted jargon and, of course, foreign items. As is so often the case when aspects of human behaviour are proscribed, it is what other people do that ends up on the blacklist. The comments are often emotional and frequently angry. As Beal (this volume) and Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (this volume) also describe, punctuation prompts particularly fiery responses. Some time back I recommended that English might be better off if it abandoned the hyphen in certain contexts and retained it only for other more useful functions (Burridge 2005: 162–4). This sparked a fierce attack (as did my suggestion that English could well survive without the services of the possessive apostrophe). The following is but one of the many emails received.

Example 1: email (concerning the hyphen) from 'The Weatherman', 22 June 2005

Subject: Grammar

Just read an article regarding your strange ideas that you have just published in the weed book or something.

I'm 25, tattooed ex con, so not in the habit of sending emails like this (or ever actually).

Although there is one thing that REALLY annoys me. People that want to take away from the English language.

If you want to become more American in your use (or non-use) as the case maybe, then so be it. *Did you note the hyphen ;-)*

But language makes us what we are, it's our common ground.

Already there are far too many illiterate people in the world.

You seem to want to make a dumb world even dumber. Good one.

It is interesting that someone who describes himself as a 25-year-old tattooed ex-con should vent spleen on a piece of punctuation. The correspondence and general feedback I receive indicate that it is not simply linguistically insecure listeners/viewers of Australia's national broadcaster who feel strongly about their language. Below are extracts from a range of some of the recent emails and letters that I have been sent from the general public. As with Example 1, the typographical errors are original:

Example 2: two emails from AM (concerning the etymology of 'Gordon Bennett'), 13 and 19 July 2008

Subject: Gordon Bennett

Dear Professor Burridge

[...] Your explanation of the term 'GORDON BENNETT' on the TV was a disgrace, worthy of both The Japanese Imperial Army and The Catholic Church.

I hope that you die (pleasantly) before me : so that I can piis on your grave.

Subject: 'Gordon Bennett='kate Burridge'= 'Unbelievable'= Cowardice.

Dear Msssssssss Burridge.

[...] Your explanation of the meaning of the term 'Gordon Bennet' on the ABC program 'Can we Help' was not only diengenious propoganda, but a bare faced lie.

Your lack of respoce to my e-mail confirms my opinion that you lack of respect: for both or yourslf and your broadcast opinions;but also more importantly, respect for people whose loyalty and sacrafice provided you with a society in which your abhorrent historical revisionist views are recieved with some tolerance.I shudder to think that theyare respected

I hope, for your sake, that we never meet in person.

Words cannot express my opinion of your actions/opinions. If they were in a less tolerant sciety, I would fear for your well being.

Example 3: letter from JP (concerning the Americanization of English), 4 September 2008

I have just heard your discourse on the Americanisation of English of ABC Wide Bay. I am one of the population who is very much

against this phenomenon, particularly on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, because, after all, I am one part of the public who help to pay the ABC announcers wages. The words which particularly annoy me are *cere moany* and *hurri cane*. [...] On several occasions I have written to the ABC Head Office complaining about these words in particular and received written replies regarding their Word pronunciation computer.

You made reference to many other words which have been integrated from the French or British language in relation to food, but these are accepted words to describe the article. *Cere moany* and *hurri cane* are not!

[...] If the offenders are so enamoured of the American language that they have to inflict these words on the Australian listeners, they should be made redundant, emigrate to the United States of America, and go get paid by the American Broadcasting Commission.

Example 4: email from IM (on the demise of the subjunctive, 1 March 2008)

I find your reference to the subjunctive being a relic, offensive. It's not just something from the past. People who have been educated or take an interest in our language still use it.

The only reason it isn't used is it that people are ignorant. Grammar hasn't been taught in school for over 30 years and now our language is suffering. It is becoming a sort of Pigeon English: omitting words such as *that* and *which* and ending sentences with a preposition for example.

I use the subjunctive and if people think I'm mixing my tenses then that's their problem. The onus is on them to be educated. Just because the government school system has let them down is no excuse. If something isn't possible, then why confuse the issue by speaking as though it is?

People generally seem to be quite happy to let English deteriorate into a kind of abbreviated American juvenile dialect, but I'm not. I'll continue resist incorrect grammar and American English.

Hitherto I have enjoyed your segment and found it educational and interesting. It is just this particular issue on which I disagree.

Example 5: email attachment (extract from the blog 'The Rape of the English Language') from WM, 9 August 2008

Why are millions of people not giving complete expression (qualification and or qualification when required) to their thoughts, and indulging in brevity, and the rape of the English language? [...]

Dr Jean Mulder [and] Kate Burridge are attempting to defend the indefensible? There has been a gradual decline in the ability to articulate and give complete expression to thoughts and ideas, by an ever increasing number of people. That this is happening, and the likes of Dr Mulder suggests that the verbal discharge (*diarrhoea*) quoted in her article is a passing phenomenon, and Kate Burridge suggests that English is not collapsing – that the future has probably never looked so good, is evidence that the inability to articulate and give complete expression to thoughts and ideas, begins in the various institutions of learning (indoctrination camps). I suspect that Dr Mulder and Kate Burridge's, main mode of transportation is by automobile, thus they would not be aware that of the Rape of the English, is not a passing phenomenon, but is escalating out of control, and is indulged in by people of all age groups. As my mode of transport is by tram, train and bus, I in a better position to assess the extent of the Rape of the English language.

As is clear from these five exchanges, the public discourse on language and value can be ferociously passionate and confident. Indeed, because of the extreme views expressed by AM (example 2), (most notably his suggestion that I might be better off dead), I was advised to contact the local police. When I explained the subject matter of these emails to the police officer (the etymology of the phrase *Gordon Bennett*, which is an exclamation of surprise, incredulity, or exasperation, probably inspired by 'gorblimey' – a corruption of 'God blind me'), he exclaimed: 'What would it be like if you spoke about something that really mattered?'. But of course language does matter and it clearly matters a lot to many people. And as Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (this volume) shows, this passion is not confined to the lay community. Here she describes the fiery exchanges between John Honey and Peter Trudgill after Honey published his book *Language is power: The story of Standard English and its enemies*.

A number of these extracts refer to Australian English and its relationship with its powerful relative, American English. In particular they express concern for the 'Americanization' of the language – currently a hot topic both in Australia and New Zealand. There are identifiable American influences on teenage slang and, more generally, on teenage culture, but the impact elsewhere on the language is

minimal. Nonetheless, reactions from older and also younger folk are typically hostile. Newspaper headlines, such as 'Facing an American Invasion', go on to 'condemn this insidious, but apparently virile, infection from the USA'. In letters to the editor and talkback calls on the radio, speakers rail against 'ugly Americanisms' – many of which, in fact, are not Americanisms at all (cf. discussion Burridge and Mulder, 1998: Chapter 12; also Burridge, 2005). The email in example 4 concerns the demise of the subjunctive but, like the Weatherman (in example 1), IM links this to the overall Americanization of the language. He writes: 'People generally seem to be quite happy to let English deteriorate into a kind of abbreviated American juvenile dialect, but I'm not.' It is perhaps the high visibility of spelling that intensifies the widespread perception of American influence. When, in 1969, the Australian State of Victoria advocated spellings such as *color* and *honor* in place of *colour* and *honour*, writers ignored the edict: 'Why should our spelling be changed to follow the American pattern?', one writer complained in a letter to *The Age* (Melbourne, 9 October 1969). Public pressure persuaded *The Age* newspaper to return to the *-our* spelling in 2001. Even though many prestigious British publications, including the London *Times*, various editions of Daniel Jones' *English Pronouncing Dictionary*, and the *OED*, promote the *-ize* spelling on words such as *legalize*, most Australians reject it outright because it smacks too much of a deference to America. As is always the case, such lay concerns about language usage are not based on genuine linguistic worries, but reflect deeper and more general social judgments. Hostility towards American usage is born of linguistic insecurity in the face of a cultural, political and economic superpower; American English usage poses a threat to authentic 'downunder English' and is tabooed.

As illustrated by the words of the Weatherman (in example 1) and also WM (in example 4), individual speakers frequently justify their concerns about language by appealing to rational explanations, such as the need for intelligibility. Or as one of the passionate supporters of the apostrophe once put it to me in a grumpy letter (after my suggestion we could survive without the possessive apostrophe): 'We shall have no formal structure of our language: it will become unteachable, unintelligible, and eventually, useless as an accurate

means of communication'.³ It seems to be more than simply a breakdown in communication that people fear; there is more at stake. In many people's minds, there is also a link between linguistic decline and moral decline:

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy at school . . . all these things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime.

(Norman Tebbit MP, BBC Radio 4, 1985; quoted in Cameron 1995: 94)

As with other acts of censorship, Tebbit is here mouthing concern for the common good. Protecting the language against perceived abuse guards against moral harm, perhaps even physical harm, because of the link made between bad language and bad behaviour. If you have no regard for the nice points of grammar, then you will probably have no regard for the law! Rules of grammar, like other rules in a society, are necessary for the health of that society.

Puristic endeavours necessarily promote a kind of mental dishonesty. Those who attempt them soon find themselves bemired in contradiction. French and British English borrowings into Australian English 'are accepted words to describe the article' – American additions are not (example 3). Nothing seems to calm these critics of American English, even pointing out (as I have done on many occasions) that some of their beloved Australianisms came originally from America, as in *bush* 'sparsely settled areas as distinct from towns' and *squatter* 'one who settles upon land without legal title'. The influx of Americans to the goldfields from the 1850s supplied several of the current favourites in the Australian lexicon (cf. Ramson, 1966). The fact that Shakespeare might have misinterpreted the word *grovelling* and backformed a new verb *to grovel* is interesting; the fact that younger Australians have done the same with *versus* and created a new verb *to verse* 'compete against' (as in *Team A is versus Team B*) is calamitous. If dictionary makers and handbook writers do acknowledge current usage and include entries like *to verse* and *yeah-no*, there are howls about declining educational standards; yet dictionaries that fail to update cease to be used (as in the case of *Funk and Wagnall's*, cf. Stockwell and Minkova, 2001: 191f). A fine illustration of the human capacity for doublethink! People's

own writing is frequently at odds with their public pontificating on language; many of the emails and letters I receive abound in grammatical and typographical errors.

The views are passionate and confident, to be sure, but they are also lacking in the norms we expect of debate on other topics. Wardhaugh (1999: 182) puts it beautifully: 'Many educated people know more about space and time, uncertainty, and quantum effects than they do about nouns and verbs.' People are experts in English simply because they speak it, and native English speakers feel free to voice an opinion. They see a very clear common sense distinction between what is 'right' and what is 'wrong', from which no amount of well-argued rational linguistic evidence can dissuade them. In 2002 Margaret Florey and I published some research on the discourse particle *yeah-no* in Australian English. In a follow-up opinion piece 'Too Much Speech-Junk? Yeah-no!' in *The Age*, former English teacher David Campbell outlined the various functions that we had identified for this new discourse particle; he then dismissed these outright on the grounds that he 'knows' that *yeah-no* is 'yet another example of speech-junk – unnecessary words that clutter up our language' (*The Age*, June 19, 2004).

As linguists are quick to point out, the Standard English that developed from the eighteenth-century prescriptivists is something of a linguistic fantasy – an ossified paragon of linguistic virtue that would be more accurately called the 'Superstandard', to acknowledge its otherworldliness.⁴ Even Robert Lowth appeared aware that the rules he was laying down belonged to something not-of-this-world, but to a more abstract level of language to be distinguished from 'common discourse'. In his Preface, he wrote: 'It is not owing then to any peculiar irregularity or difficulty of our Language, but that the general practice both of speaking and writing it is chargeable with inaccuracy. It is not the Language, but the practice, that is in fault' (1762: v–vi); cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2002, 2008). Yet, many speakers of English believed in this Superstandard. And they continue to believe in, if not the existence, then the possibility of a single correct language system. Such beliefs are powerful – as anyone who has tried to meddle with the cherished standard knows. Speakers want their reference books to tell them what is and what is not 'proper' because they wish to appear well edu-

cated and to eloquently maintain 'correct usage'. Dictionaries and handbooks that acknowledge change are abrogating their responsibility. So too are the style manuals that recognize options. The language professionals who produce these texts are in a difficult position, as the shamans who stand between the object of worship and ordinary mortals. Linguists are clearly also in a tricky position. In the eyes of the wider speech community, they are seen as supporters of a permissive ethos encouraging the supposed decline and continued abuse of Standard English.

In 2001 the new *Herald Style Guide* for Australian journalists appeared on the scene. In a discussion on radio with the writer, Kim Lockwood, I suggested that the rules he outlined weren't cut-and-dried and that he should have guided his readers through the range of available options. Other rules, I argued, were no longer valid and should be dispensed with. One frustrated talkback caller felt that he had summed it all up when he said: 'She doesn't get it, does she?'. There is a sense in which the caller was right – linguists generally don't get it. It's not about linguistic facts. What matters to talkback callers like this one is how they perceive their language to be.

The language garden

Ah, fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed;

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet* [I.ii])

What unites people's observations and queries is the concern that they show for the well-being of their language. It has always brought to my mind a picture of English as some sort of garden that, if not carefully and constantly tended, would become unruly and overgrown. Shakespeare expressed it far more eloquently in the above quotation from *Hamlet*.

The garden is an apt image here. Clearly, gardens and standard languages have much in common. Both are human constructions and they share two fundamental characteristics. They are restricted by boundaries and they are cultivated. Garden weeds also provide an instructive metaphor. Described as 'plants growing where we do not want them', 'plants whose virtues are yet to be discovered', 'plants growing out of place', 'plants that you do not want', 'plants that you hate', garden weeds are the perfect symbol for speakers' linguistic *bêtes noires*. A more precise horticultural definition

for the term *weed*, even in technical works on weed management, is impossible – in fact not practicable. The difficulty is that weeds are context specific. It depends entirely on location and on time whether something is classified as a weed or not. And so it is with the weeds in language. One speaker's noxious weed can be another's garden ornamental. A linguistic weed today can be a prized garden contributor tomorrow. Whether they are in gardens or in languages, weeds are totally centred around human value judgements.

As is evident in the correspondence above, for those in the wider community, there is usually a very clear distinction between the unwanted plants in the garden and those that should be encouraged to survive. Accordingly, they view linguists as the seasoned gardeners whose task is precisely to advise on what should be trimmed, removed or promoted in the garden – linguists control the pests, build the hothouses and perform the topiary. Not surprisingly, many people reject the neutral position of the linguistics profession. As Bolinger (1980) and Cameron (1995) have also shown, the feeling is one of mutual distrust; linguistic experts fail to address lay concerns and lay activists show no interest in heeding linguists.⁵

The great gardening debates of the 18th and 19th centuries can shed light here. Gardeners during this time fell into two camps over the question of what constituted a 'proper garden' (Taylor, 1951). For some it was a work of nature, while for others a work of art. In the same way, linguists see language as a natural (even if social) phenomenon, something that evolves and adapts and can be studied objectively. This stance is resoundingly rejected by others in the wider community for whom language is an art form, something to be cherished, revered and preserved. Just as William Morris once said of the ideal garden: 'It should be well fenced from the outside world. It should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature' (Morris, 1882). Linguists find such popular perceptions of language ill-informed and narrow-minded. The general population feels let down.

Taboo revisited – matter out of place

We can recognise in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected

elements of ordered systems. It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing laying on chairs; outdoor things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.

(Douglas, 1966: 48)

In Allan and Burrige (2006), we explore the ins and outs of many words and phrases that have, for a variety of reasons, been subject to cultural and social proscription. They cover the usual suspects: sexual and scatological obscenities, ethnic-racial slurs, insults, name-calling, profanity, blasphemy, slang, jargon and vulgarities of all kinds, and we also include the forbidden words of non-standard language. All these tabooed expressions clearly range along scales of offensiveness, potency and wounding capacity, but they are every one of them emotionally powerful in some way.

The linguistic evidence for the emotional quality of taboo expressions is strong (cf. Allan and Burrige, 1991, 2006). Such is the power of these terms that innocent vocabulary may also be affected through spurious association. Even across languages these words contaminate other words, bringing down blameless bystanders that just happen to sound similar. Moreover, taboo senses seem to have a saliency that will dominate and eventually kill off all other senses belonging to any language expression recruited as euphemism.⁶ Taboo terms have been contaminated by the taboo concepts they represent. Yet, clearly the obscenity lies in the actual words themselves – not in what they refer to. This is why taboo words are often described as unpleasant or ugly-sounding and why they are miscalled *dirty words*. These words are felt to be intrinsically offensive and that makes them disturbing.

Psychological, physiological and neurological studies also corroborate that taboo words are more arousing, more shocking, more memorable and more evocative than all other language stimuli. Over the years there has been a lot of research into the effects of arousal on memory. The findings are always the same:

taboo words are more stimulating than non-taboo words and we appear to store them differently in memory (Jay, 2000: 102–5 outlines a battery of laboratory experiments from the 1960s through to the 1990s that look at the recall of taboo words). A number of the experiments have also measured the emotional impact of words using techniques such as electrodermal monitoring (a kind of polygraph). This records ‘skin conductance responses’ (or ‘galvanic skin responses’). Research supports overwhelmingly what every native speaker knows: ‘dirty’ words compared to other words evoke stronger skin conductance responses – or what might loosely be called goose bumps.⁷ As Henry Wyld observed early last century, forbidden words are able to ‘chill the blood and raise gooseflesh’ (Wyld, 1936: 387). This now has scientific confirmation (for example, McGinnies, 1949; Zajonc, 1962; Gray et al., 1982; Dinn and Harris, 2000; Harris et al., 2003).

It would be interesting to measure (using, say, electrodermal monitoring) the emotional impact of a wider range of forbidden language forms, beyond the kinds of obscenity so far investigated. I have in mind those pronunciations that people describe as ‘slipshod’, those ‘mistakes’ in grammar, the ‘Americanisms’, the newfangled meanings, colloquialisms, jargon, clichés, new coinages, PC expressions and so on. I have no doubt that psycho-physiological testing would show that an encounter with one of these irritating phrases not only activates their meaning, but also leads to emotional arousal. Speakers often describe expressions as getting up their nose, getting under their skin, getting on their nerves/wick, turning their stomach, sticking in their throat, making their hair curl / flesh creep / blood run cold. AB complains in an email: ‘It has always gotten under my skin to hear people say “object-orientated”.’ ‘Everyone around me always says “the data is” and that does something to my neckhairs’, writes ED of Woodford, New South Wales. The word *hatch* (instead of *itch*) apparently makes JV of Perth, Western Australia feel like she’s covered in fire ants. Irritating words, phrases and grammatical constructions figuratively touch many parts of the anatomy, and presumably this would be reflected in larger skin conductance amplitudes of a polygraph tracing.

Mary Douglas’ theory of pollution and taboo offers interesting insights here. As Douglas

sees it, the distinction between cleanliness and filth stems from the basic human need for categorization – our need to structure the chaotic environment around us and render it understandable. That which is dirty is that which does not fit in with our ‘cherished classifications’; dirt is matter ‘out of place’ (Douglas, 1966:189). The standardization process forces languages into tidy classificatory systems. The neat lists and elegant paradigms inside the dictionary and handbook provide the perfect counterpart to the ‘boundless chaos of a living speech’ that lies outside. There are no grey areas any more, but clear boundaries as to what is and what is not acceptable. The language is defined by condemnation and proscription of certain words and constructions deemed impure or not belonging. The infiltration of linguistic innovations, lexical exotics, and non-standard features is a transgression of the defining boundaries and poses a threat to the language – as well as to the society of which the language is a manifestation and a symbol. Accordingly they are tabooed and brushed aside.

Acts that are committed in the name of verbal hygiene show traces of the same insecurities that lie behind many other taboos – the need to feel in control. Human beings are fearful when they feel they have lost or are losing control of their destinies. These fears are just as acute today as they have been in the past. Medical miracles, designer bodies, IVF babies and quick-fix surgery feed the fantasy we live in safety. And yet illnesses still arrive out of the blue, caused by unseen microbes and toxins. Many still have no cure. Death remains inevitable. Endeavours to intervene in language are just more attempts to take charge and control nature; language standardization tries to impose order on a natural phenomenon. There have been individuals who have gone to extreme lengths to engineer logical, consistent, and transparent languages that perfectly match the thinking of their speakers and ditto reality. If one such language could somehow become the first language of speakers, it would inevitably be struck with precisely the same linguistic infirmities as natural languages: the same vagueness, indeterminacy, variability, anomaly and inconsistency. As linguists are quick to point out, any regular and homogeneous communication system would be dysfunctional. Mary Douglas concludes her ideas on pollution thus: ‘The moral of all this is

that the facts of existence are a chaotic jumble' (1966: 193). Then so, too, is the language we use to describe these facts. Like gardens, standard languages are never finished products. To create such a work of art is to enter into a partnership with natural processes; prescription would soon render the work sterile and useless.

And here lies the paradox of taboo and tabooing practices. As described earlier, puristic endeavours necessarily involve a degree of mental dishonesty that comes from the inevitable contradiction between the linguistic behaviour of language users and the views they hold about their language. Forbidden language forms (or so-called 'bad language') can be proscribed and set apart, just like those other aspects of life that fall outside what is 'proper' and that make people feel uncomfortable, because they are dangerous or distasteful. They can be banned from being heard, seen or touched; but not only won't they go away, they are essential to the continuation of life, living, and language.

A final word

There is clearly a sense in which standard languages pass into supernatural realms. They become an ideal that speakers have for their language and everyday usage never quite rises to the occasion – not even the performances of 'good' speakers and writers. Editors, dictionary makers and handbook writers, who help to establish and maintain this object of worship, become the ones with the specialized knowledge. They possess the shamanic powers to control the events, to diagnose and to cure. Some even create certain of the rituals of prohibition and avoidance themselves – as Bolinger (1980: 7) once put it, 'a bit after the fashion of a fireman who makes himself necessary by setting a fire (since the shamans are among the advertisers)'. It is after all the activities of these language professionals that advertise violations of codes and draw people's attention to ill-chosen words, grammatical errors and infelicities of style. Once condemned by those in authority, these features find themselves no longer a part of what is good and what is proper.

However, there are signs of change. Growing egalitarianism and social democracy are now seeing the solidarity function of accents gaining over the status function. The relation-

ship between standard and nonstandard usage is clearly transforming with changes in educational practices heralding the end of years of institutionalized prescription. Colloquialization, liberalization and the effects of e-communication now mean nonstandard language 'is achieving a new presence and respectability within society' (Crystal, 2006: 408). So will this spell the end of linguistic purism?

Dictionaries and handbooks give acts of linguistic purification a more public arena. However, there is ample evidence of linguistic purism throughout the history of English, even before people started to lay down the laws on standards. A good example is the hostile response provoked by the influx of 'inkhorn terms' during the Renaissance. Purists went as far as attempting to revive obsolete native words (some even created new ones). These activities occurred well before the creation of any English language dictionaries as we know them (Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade, pers. com.). Field linguists report that speakers of non-standardized, non-written languages also express prescriptive sentiments. Crowley (1997: 26–7) describes how in villages all around the Pacific, parents and grandparents criticize younger speakers for not speaking 'properly'. And as Dorian (1994) has argued, purism in this context can be the kiss of death when the situation is one of potential language shift.

But what about those younger English speakers today – those who have grown up with variation and change as facts of linguistic life? A recent survey of our first year linguistics students revealed that these young speakers overwhelmingly showed intolerance towards language change, especially when it came to American English influence (Ferguson, 2008). Of the 71 students surveyed, 81% expressed the view that the incorporation of American elements into Australian English was detrimental to the language. Here are some typical explanations offered: 'Because Australian English would then slowly perish and it won't be unique anymore'; 'Loss of Australian identity'; 'Often US English seems to use "wrong" words, I don't like the use of "z" instead of "s" and cannot stand "for free"'; 'Why would we want to speak American English? I think "they" are lazy with language'; 'American accents are so nasal and it sounds yuck. American rap terms ≠ cool'; 'Even though it's not sociolinguistically correct to say this, but I think that American English is "bad" English and we should try and

stay away from it as much as possible.’ These students have gone through the ‘language in use’ approach at school. They have also had one year of linguistics and been immersed in the accepted wisdom of the discipline. Yet I see no evidence of any new open-mindedness in their linguistic thinking. Crystal has predicted a new egalitarian linguistic era where ‘eternal tolerance’ will replace the old ‘eternal vigilance’ (2006: 410–11). Perhaps it is simply, as he says, that new attitudes and practices take time.

However, I do not believe that purism is simply the by-product of codification and generations of prescriptive thinking. As long as we signal our identity via linguistic means, we will continue to judge others by how they speak. I imagine that for as long as human language has existed people have complained about the language of their fellow speakers. An integral part of the linguistic behaviour of every human group is the desire to constrain and manage language and to purge it of unwanted elements. Next to the shamans are the self-appointed arbiters of linguistic goodness, ordinary language users who follow the ritual and taboo those words and constructions they see as ‘unorderly’ and outside the boundaries of the standard language. Feelings about what is ‘clean’ and what is ‘dirty’ in language are universal and humankind would have to change beyond all recognition before these urges to control and clean up the language disappeared. The definition of ‘dirt’ might change over the years, but the desire to clean up remains the same. ■

Notes

1 I want to emphasize how grateful I am to Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade for organizing such a splendid workshop for the ISLE conference. I am also very appreciative of the feedback she provided on this paper. The goings-on I describe here parallel what she also encounters in her own research on 18th century English (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2008) – though, as she says, without the violence (it was, after all the golden age of politeness!).

2 The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1775) identifies the genius of a language as: ‘the particular set of ideas which the words [...] either from their formation or multiplicity, are apt to excite in the mind of anyone who hears it properly uttered’. Quoted in Leonard (1962: 29).

3 Here is the full text of this letter: ‘How disappointing it is that those who direct the nature and structure of our language should be so accepting of

outright errors and misuse of our language. First John Hajek, Melbourne University, and now Kate Burridge (Burrage?) of Latrobe. I should like to know why the misused and incorrect English of the ignorant, the ill-informed, the apathetic and the lazy should be acceptable? If this continues we shall have no formal structure of our language: it will become unteachable, unintelligible, and eventually, useless as an accurate means of communication. Can you imagine the French, the Italians, the Germans allowing gross abuse being acceptable to their academics.’ [MF, 21 March 1996]

4 See Wolfram and Fasold 1974 for a discussion of ‘superstandard forms’ of language. Milroy and Milroy 1985 also write about standardization as ideology and the ‘standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent’ (1985: 23).

5 A number of years ago a newspaper article appeared which vividly conveyed the views of many in the wider community towards professional linguists. Here Laurence Urdang, editor of *Verbatim*, described linguists as ‘categorically the dullest people on the face of the earth; ... rather than trying to present and explain information, they seem to be going in the opposite direction. They try to shield people from knowing anything useful about the language’ (*The Washington Post*, January 13 1992, p. D5 and reprinted in *The Age*).

6 More generally the belief in the potency of words has been dubbed the NATURALIST HYPOTHESIS (cf. Allan, 1986, 2001); the quote of Sir James Frazer puts it neatly: ‘[...] the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but a real and substantial bond which unites the two’ (1911: 318). The naturalist hypothesis forms the very basis for the distinction between the mentionable euphemism, on the one hand, and an unmentionable taboo alternative.

7 I have been routinely reprimanded by people (far more knowledgeable in this field than me) that galvanic skin responses are definitely not goose bumps. And I accept this. Galvanic skin responses (GSR) are changes in the skin’s ability to conduct electricity, while goose bumps (GB) refer to the visible roughness of the skin (resembling that of a plucked goose). On the one hand, we are looking at an increase in sweat gland activity (the GSR) and, on the other, hairs standing on end (the GB). Both can be triggered by strong emotions and, to my mind, the feeling that ordinary folk like me think of as ‘creeping of the flesh’ applies in a non-specialized sense to both states.

References

- Allan, K. 1986. *Linguistic Meaning (Vols 1 and 2)*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (Reprint edn: World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1991).

- and Burrige, K. 1991. *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Bolinger, D. 1980. *Language: The Loaded Weapon*. London: Longman.
- Burrige, K. 2004. *Blooming English: Observations on the Roots, Cultivation and Hybrids of the English Language*. Cambridge: University Press.
- . 2005. *Weeds in the Garden of Words: Further Observations on the Tangled History of the English Language*. Cambridge: University Press.
- & Florey, M. 2002. “‘Yeah-no he’s a good kid””: a discourse analysis of *yeah-no* in Australian English.’ *The Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 22, 149–72.
- & Mulder, J. 1998. *English in Australia and New Zealand: An Introduction to its Structure, History and Use*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, D. 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. London: Routledge.
- Crowley, T. 1997. *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*. Oxford: University Press.
- Crystal, D. 2006. ‘Into the twenty-first century.’ In Lynda Mugglestone (ed.), *The Oxford History of English*. Oxford: University Press, pp. 394–413.
- Dinn, W. M. & Harris, C. L. 2000. ‘Neurocognitive function in antisocial personality disorder.’ *Psychiatry Research*, 97, 173–90.
- Dorian, N. 1994. ‘Purism vs. compromise in language revitalization and language revival.’ *Language in Society*, 23, 479–94.
- Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ferguson, N. 2008. ‘The Americanisation of Australian English: attitudes, perception and usage.’ Honours Thesis. Monash University.
- Frazer, Sir J. G. 1911. *The Golden Bough Part II: Taboo and The Perils of the Soul*. 3rd edn. London: Macmillan.
- Gray, S. G., Hughes, H. H. & Schneider, L. J. 1982. ‘Physiological responsivity to a socially stressful situation: the effect of level of moral development.’ *Psychological Record*, 32, 29–34.
- Harris, C. L., Ayçiçeği, A. & Gleason, J. B. 2003. ‘Taboo words and reprimands elicit greater autonomic reactivity in a first language than in a second language.’ *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 24, 561–79.
- Jay, T. 2000. *Why We Curse: A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Johnson, S. 1755. *A Dictionary of the English Language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar*. 2 vols. London: W. Strahan et al.
- Leonard, S. A. 1962. *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700–1800*. New York: Russell and Russell. [First published 1929].
- Lockwood, K. 2001. *Style: A Guide for Journalists*. Sydney: News Limited.
- McGinnies, E. 1949. ‘Emotionality of perceptual defense.’ *Psychological Review*, 56, 244–51.
- Milroy, J. & Milroy, L. 1985. *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardisation*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Inc.
- Morris, W. 1882. ‘Making the best of it’, in *The Hopes and Fears for Art*. (A Paper read before the Trades’ Guild of Learning and the Birmingham Society of Artists).
- Ramson, W. S. 1966. *Australian English: an Historical Study of the Vocabulary, 1788–1898*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.
- Stockwell, R. & Minkova, D. 2001. *English Words: History and Structure*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Taylor, G. 1951. *Some Nineteenth-Century Gardeners*. Essex: The Anchor Press.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, I. 2002. ‘Robert Lowth and the strong verb system.’ *Language Sciences* 24, (3–4), pp. 459–70.
- . 2008. (ed) *Grammars, Grammarians and Grammar-Writing in Eighteenth-Century England*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Truss, L. 2004. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Wardhaugh, R. 1999. *Proper English: Myths and Misunderstandings about Language*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Watts, R. & Trudgill, P. (eds). 2002. *Alternative Histories of English*. London: Routledge.
- Wolfram, W. & Fasold, R. W. 1974. *Social Dialects and American English*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Wyld, H. C. 1936. *A History of Modern Colloquial English*. Oxford: Blackwell [First published 1920].
- Zajonc, R. B. 1962. ‘Response suppression in perceptual defense.’ *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 64, 206–14.