

Dude, WTF! How Bad English Improves the Language

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, and culture.

Today's Topic is Dude, WTF! How Bad English Improves the Language.

Our guest this week is Valerie Fridland who is a professor of linguistics at the University of Nevada at Reno, and she is the author of the book Like, Literally, Dude.

I am annoyed when others abuse the English language, but I recognize that languages evolve. Some good and some bad. I want to hear from Valerie about how that process works and who is leading that evolution.

Valerie, can you please begin your six-minute opening remarks.

Valerie Fridland:

I'm Valerie Fridland and I'm the author of the new book, Like Literally Dude, Arguing for the Good in Bad English. I wrote this book because I hate it when people say "literally" or "like" or what's up with that weird crackly vocal fry that I'm hearing all the time now? We don't tend to love these new features that we hear in our speech. And we also don't tend to stop and think about why people are using them. Why have they become so popular, particularly in American English? As a sociolinguist, someone who studies language and society, I'm in a unique position to answer those questions.

We have a lot of social triggers operating in our world today in the form of migration, settlement, economic ecologies, social change, and even the social soup that is middle and high school. One of the things that we're tied to as speakers that we have a really hard time getting over is prescriptive. This one view we've learned since the time we're little about what language is and what it should be. And we don't realize that the concept of prescription itself is quite recent.

It's only in the 18th century with the rise of the middle class and the breakdown of rigid class barriers that we see these ideas about what speech should be emerge. Grammar books and dictionaries started to come out. They typically were based on the norms of the upper class because language was one of the last remaining markers of aristocracy. And this is what today we consider good English. It was simply the norms and the beliefs of a certain higher socioeconomic strata from a certain time period. And many of these things that we think we know about language are actually wrong.

And a great example of that is, if I asked you what are the vowels of English, you would no doubt tell me A E I O U and perhaps throw in that sometimes Y? But the reality is English has many more vowels than this. In fact, we have 13 or 14 vowels in English, not these five, just depending on your dialect. If you say words like beat, bit, bait, bet, bat, but, boat, bit, boot, you see that all of those only differ on the vowels. And so there must be many more vowels than simply five in English. But because of how we've been taught in English class about what language is, and we really feel strongly about those being the only right vowels. Just like we feel very strongly about what the right verbs are, what the right subjects can be.

My goal in writing this book was to first unpack where the features that we notice come from. So where does 'like' come from? What is it used for? What's its purpose? What happened to literally along the way? My goal is that people will start to understand why language has to change and who has driven it forward and what types of directions it tends to travel in. And with that, I hope a little more compassion will emerge when we look at those speakers that say the things we love to hate.

Larry Bernstein:

Years ago, I read Mark Twain's novel A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. I was thinking about how time dependency works in linguistics. If I engaged in time travel, could I communicate with Thomas Jefferson?

Valerie Fridland:

Yes, at that point we could. If you go back much further, then it's a little harder. By the time we reached the 15th century or so, we could communicate. It wouldn't be easy, and we'd have to take some time to get used to it, mainly because the words were quite different.

Our vocabulary has changed vastly over the last few hundred years because English started to emerge as an institutional language around the 15th, 16th, 17th century and we started borrowing huge amounts of words. However, if you go back to 1000, when William the Conqueror was around, we would not be able to understand because that version of English was so drastically different than the English we speak today. I think people don't realize, if you look at the last 500 years of English, the rate of change has slowed down considerably compared to the previous 800 years.

Larry Bernstein:

And why is that?

Valerie Fridland:

Well, a lot of it is literacy and codification and standardization. If you look at the history of the last 1500 years in Britain, you'll see that we had migration, we had wars, we had invasions, and we had English as only a colloquial language. It was a vulgar language. English wasn't spoken by anybody in the elite for a thousand years. It was Latin, it was French. Classical languages were used as the language of religion, the language of medicine, the language of institutions, the language of law.

English was just spoken by the common people. And when you don't have a purpose that tries to hold it still like education, like institutional use, it changes because natural inherent pressures emerge to make language more efficient over time. When you have an overlay of a different language, you also forced change much faster. And during the Middle English period, we got a huge amount of our words from French.

Since the 15th century, English rose to become the language of government and institution literacy. The printing press started, and all of that solidified the dominance of English. And with dominance, with literacy, comes codification and standardization and those things hold language still.

Larry Bernstein:

How much are we adding to the English language today?

Valerie Fridland:

We're constantly inviting new words. Our initial word stock was pretty much a hundred percent Germanic. By the time the French were around, we had taken a lot of words in from old Norse, which was also Germanic language. Then in the 15, 16, 1700s, we wanted to enrich the vocabulary of English and we turned to classical languages like Latin and Greek. We got a huge inflow at that time in medicine, in law particularly. Those words are of Greek or Latin origin because that was where we borrowed them from in that period when we needed more words to talk about those things.

And then recently, we have a lot of Japanese, Spanish, Hebrew influences on English. When we colonized the Americas, we took in a lot of Indigenous words and Native American languages. From contact with those languages, we got words like lobster, a lot of place names, a lot of food names. I don't think we've ever stopped bringing in those influences. The rate probably has slowed because we have a lot of words in English, and we don't need that many more.

Larry Bernstein:

I grew up in Chicago and when I was a child there was a very small Hispanic population, but by 2050 Chicago is expected to be majority Hispanic. And many of them are native Spanish

speakers. How will the interaction of so many Spanish speakers change the nature of English spoken in places like Chicago.

Valerie Fridland:

A lot depends on how that language is coming in. Spanish, like other immigrant languages, tends to be assimilated into English. We get new words and new dialects often arise, but the standard language model typically doesn't change to accommodate it.

The influence of large numbers of Spanish speakers coming in on standard English norms is probably quite slow and fairly small, just like we would see when we had a big Irish influx into the United States. In Chicago there certainly are vowel changes that are going on that might have some substrate influence from Spanish.

Larry Bernstein:

You mention that pre-1500, English is a backwater language and then it quickly becomes the dominant language in the world. Some believe that is because of the global nature of the British Empire and then the economic success of the US. Is there anything special about English that makes it easy to speak and understand?

Valerie Fridland:

Well, it's not a very morpho and tactically complex language. And by that, I mean it had a lot of endings. In Old English, every word had some ending that told you where it went, what it did, and why it was there. We don't have any of that anymore. A lot of that's been contact with other languages that has atrophied those endings. Which is why it's funny when people get so upset if someone deletes a plural ending today. So, if someone says "three dollar" because of an influence of their background language instead of "three dollars" when English used to have not just plural 's.'

They used to have like three different ways to mark plurals in old English that we don't use at all anymore. So, it's just being nitpicky <laugh> to get upset about it today. But so, it is true that it's less morpho complex. We do things instead with word order. Also, with things like adverbs and propositions and helping words. That's potentially psychologically easier to acquire than a word, a language that has more morphos and tactically complex grammar. What we see is when you get two languages that are learned by large numbers of non-native speakers, they tend to transmit that language with less morpho syntactic complexity, which suggests that that's somehow easier to grasp than the really intimate relationship between parent and child that's required for very complex languages with lots of endings.

And it's called isolating languages which have very few endings versus a gluten of languages that have a ton of them. So Chinese, for example, is very isolating.

Larry Bernstein:

In 1998, I moved to Tokyo to run Salomon's proprietary trading department. I had no chance of learning enough Japanese to speak effectively in business. Yet, we had a team of Japanese professionals who could speak English competently. Why is that?

Valerie Fridland:

Well, that had less to do with the complexity of the language and more to do with the power of the language. The fundamental point is that the benefit accrues to those that can use language in a way that helps them with their economy and helps them with their institutional practices. It is more beneficial for the Japanese to learn English in the world economy than it is for you to learn Japanese as a personal decision. If you look at how it's classified, English is at the very top of the pyramid of languages in which scientific endeavors are done, legal endeavors are done, government institutional endeavors are done and trade is done, and therefore it's makes sense that people would flock to a language that has that kind of utility.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do some people find the word "like" annoying?

Valerie Fridland:

I don't find "like" problematic. But it is the number one feature people complain to me about the decay of language. "Like" always came up. And my students certainly use it and feel self-conscious about using it. The interesting thing about "like" used as a discourse marker, which is where it's not strictly tied to the semantic meaning of the sentence, its meaning is more pragmatic or conversational.

When we look at criminal court proceedings from the old Bailey transcripts from the 1700s, we find "like" appears there as a discourse marker just like we use it today. Also, when you look at recordings from the 1950s in New Zealand of octogenarians of older speakers that had immigrated to New Zealand from Britain in the late 1800s, they use "like" excessively at the beginning of their sentences as a discourse participle. It's not a new feature. And in those varieties, it's pretty similar to how it's used in American English today, but that people didn't notice because it wasn't used that often.

And then in the late 80s it seemed to have taken off. A lot of this was driven by this iconic image of the Valley girl. I think Moon Unit and Frank Zappa had a lot to do with that, where they popularized a feature that was becoming more popular in Southern California. Since California has been featured as part of this view of what America is and what America should be, especially with young people, its influence has been unusually great.

For someone that uses it naturally, it has three main functions in addition to its grammatical functions.

If someone uses “about,” would you say they're saying something meaningless? Probably not. But if they use “like” in that exact same context, somehow it becomes meaningless again, just a matter of perspective. It's also used as a discourse marker. That's where we put it at the beginning of the sentence to highlight that what you're about to say is your own stance or your own evaluation of what was just said either by you or another speaker. We also use it as a discourse participle where it's used in the middle of a sentence to highlight or emphasize something. So that would be an example such as “I waited for like 10 hours for you,” where maybe I didn't wait 10 hours. But what I'm saying is, “look dude, you wait made me wait a long time and I'm pissed.”

But you can see we have a bunch of different likes. You have likes that are used as verbs, likes that are used as nouns, likes that are used as prepositions, likes that are used as conjunction. And now you also have likes that are used as approximators discourse participles, discourse markers, verbs. So, does it come across like there's a lot of likes? Absolutely. Does that make them meaningless? Not if you understand all those different purposes. But if it's not native to me, I will hear them as useless and pointless.

Larry Bernstein:

Penny Eckert wrote a book, *Jocks and Burnouts*, suggesting that individuals in high school of a particular social class have more influence. Who are the important players in our society that influence the use of language and introduce new words and expressions?

Valerie Fridland:

Penny is an amazing linguist and has been very influential in my career. If we look at the history of language change, not just in English but globally in all languages, we find the same recurrent players as the leaders of linguistic change, both in modern times and in in past: the young, the female and the lower classes. And while we often ascribe good language and standard norms to upper middle-class speakers and often men, the reality is those are just adoptions of language forms that were already in play.

When we look at who introduced most of those standard forms that we take as good English today and we go back in the historical records to try to find evidence of when they started to emerge, what we find is it's usually lower class innovations that have spread up through the social hierarchy, often through the mouths of women and became the norms by which we applaud our speech today.

Larry Bernstein:

I have a son and a daughter, and it appears to me that the discussions between young girls have much more varied vocabularies, is that true?

Valerie Fridland:

I don't know of many studies that have compared word count among teenage boys to teenage girls, but I guarantee you if you go in a room full of a bunch of teenage boys that are talking to each other, there is a lot of conversation going on.

Whether my son talks to me is a different question, whereas my daughter spends more time both talking to me and her friends. And so maybe it's partly that their speech is more visible to us rather than more frequent. But when we study the word counts of women in professional arenas, what we find is typically women talk less than men.

But the social pressures on men and women, especially as adolescents, are vastly different. And those different social pressures are immensely important in the direction of language change over time. When we look at the changes that are innovated by young women, most of them are ones that come up from under the level of consciousness. We call them changes from below in linguistics, which means that people aren't aware of doing them, they're these very low-level variations in speech. For example, whether you say you're a vowel as "eah" or "uh" so if I'm a New Yorker, I might say that if I'm a California, I'll say that those are actually really subtle changes in the vowels that have happened over time led by young women.

Young men are attracted to hip hop language and ethnic subculture language because those come with the ideologies of masculinity, which is toughness, physicality, strength, roughness. Those are really stereotypes about the speakers that use those features. So, unlike women who are drawing from these sensitive low-level changes that don't have meaning attached yet at an overt level, young men tend to bring in features to their speech, like "dude, bro, ain't," that are strongly marked with a stigma, but a stigma of cool.

If a woman starts to do that, she doesn't get treated very well because of it. When young women goes home and they're using hip hop language, it doesn't go over so well with mom and dad, but when young men come home with it somehow, they're rewarded some covert prestige.

Larry Bernstein:

I was born and raised in Chicago, and I always thought that Chicago had no accent as compared to Boston or the Deep South. But Bill Labov who is a famous linguist who taught at the University of Pennsylvania did experiments where he showed that other Americans had trouble understanding Chicago speakers because of their accents with regard to their use of vowels.

Valerie Fridland:

That's a very famous study by Bill and some of his students that looked at different versions of words and played them in different places to see how well they were understood. He did it in Chicago and then he also compared it with speech in from Birmingham, Alabama.

But the reality is, we all talk weird. Everybody has an accent, we just don't hear it because those people we talk to the most sound just like we do, we only hear it when we go somewhere else, and we realize that it's hard to understand us or we can't understand someone else. And we're pretty good at learning different dialects. So, we do something called vowel normalization as listeners and over a few days you get better at it, which is why, for example, if you go to Scotland, you cannot understand them for the first day, but after two or three days you can kind of get along pretty well at least at the bar <laugh>. But Labov's work was critical because he both was the first to really make many people from the Midwest and from the North who thought their language was superior, understand that they had a version of language just like everybody else.

But he also was the first to trace these major regional shifts that were happening in American English that have drastically changed the way that English speakers in America say words over the last 50 or 60 years. Vowels don't just move in random ways; they move in ways predictable by our brains and our mouths. The same kinds of changes have happened throughout history in many languages. He was one of the first to look at the changes in American English and be able to relate it to changes that have happened in the historical record and in other languages to try to trace these universal principles.

He's done a great job of publicizing the fact that dialects are something that are deeply tied to our social identities, where we're from, who we are.

He was one of the first to trace the pattern of women in leading those changes, not just in Chicago speech, but in Southern speech, in California speech, in Canadian speech, and of tracing the ethnic segregation. What he found is he looked at comparisons between white speakers and non-white speakers and found that most of these valid changes that are happening are Anglo vowel changes. And most of the ethnic variety spoken have either their own vowel shifts happening or are moving away from white speech.

Some of it is white flight from the vowels of African American speech. And some of it's just simply a marker of the fact that we are not integrated as a society and it's a very good way to look at people's integration levels in different cities and compare them. We find that African American Southerners and white southerners actually have a much more similar vowel system than northern white speakers and northern black speakers. It doesn't mean that people are integrated in terms of their social networks, but in terms of vast numbers of African Americans

that live in southern cities and their involvement in those cities compared to northern cities where they tend to be much more ghettoized and segregated.

Larry Bernstein:

My son listens to rap music and has much greater exposure to African American use of language than I did. Do you think that will affect his use of that dialect in the future? Or is listening to music different from conversation?

Valerie Fridland:

I don't think the long-term effects are going to last because they use those in some ways to be non-conformist and rebellious. But as they age, we find something called age grading, which is where certain speech features that get picked up for social purpose in adolescence start to fade off. Urban speech is very much tied to African American English, and that doesn't matter whether you're black or white, but still the language of success is based on white male middle class norms.

And for boys like your son, chances are they won't bring much of their African American English variety into the professional world with them. Those will be sort of short-lived.

Larry Bernstein:

I've been doing this podcast for over three years. I make transcripts and I noticed that the academic speakers open many of their sentences with the word "so." They also use the words "actually" and "really". What do you find?

Valerie Fridland:

I am guilty of all of those. I know that from listening to myself in podcasts and they're the conversational glue. We can't have conversations without signposting people where we're going and without connecting to where we've been. And particularly when we teach, we have a lot of signposting going on in our speech. We learn to do it because we must make sure everybody keeps up with us. I think we use "actually" a lot to signal that what we're going to say is slightly different than the idea that you had when you asked me that question or what I had just said. It signals this contrastive state.

The other thing that is very common among professors is to use things like "right" at the end of our statements. I do this because I want to make sure we're all on the same page. We're checking for listenership and we're inviting inferences.

All of these features are very helpful as conversational cohesion markers and as ways for me to tell you the stance I'm going to take and what I'm about to say and how it connects to what we were just talking about.

Larry Bernstein:

We use audio editing in this podcast. And we eliminate the uh from the podcast. Does the uh serve a purpose and is it a mistake to remove them.

Valerie Fridland:

The Uh are what linguists refer to as filled pauses, and there have been a number of really fascinating studies on their purpose. Does it enhance the listener's experience? Yes and no. Unconsciously, it enhances that listener's experience because we find that uhs do really important signaling work that help them understand what a speaker's saying. Consciously people don't like them. They tend to be disfavored because we are tied to only things that contribute semantic information.

The less interesting the speaker, the more we notice that in fact it can be distracting. So, does it enhance the listening experience? Not from that perspective. Does it enhance the listener's cognitive reception of the material? There's also evidence that suggests yes, it does.

That when a speaker hears when a speaker uses uh, it usually signals either new information, more abstract information, less familiar information, or more syntactically complex information. It signals first of all, I'm not done with my turn as a speaker and I'm going to continue, so don't jump in. But we also find really interesting studies that suggest because we understand as a listener that uhs signal something harder is about to come, that we devote more cognitive resources to unpacking what they're about to say. The benefit is it actually helps us integrate that new information more quickly and remember it better later.

So, from a cognitive perspective, yes, it does do some beneficial work. From a perceptual perspective, no, we don't like it and we consider it distracting. So, it's hard to integrate those two different viewpoints because it's a perfect example of something that has cognitive benefits but not social benefits.

Larry Bernstein:

This is a podcast, and it differs from an article or a presentation because it is a conversation. Why do people prefer listening to conversations?

Valerie Fridland:

I think part of the reasons podcasts have become very popular is because people anticipate their conversational and that's one of the reasons people like them rather than a formal interview that is more stiff.

But our speech in general is less formal than it used to be, and we seem to enjoy those formats more today than we ever did before. And I think podcasts are a really nice hybrid between the more formal interviews because they're long form but in a casual style that invites people in as if they're in the living room with you.

Larry Bernstein:

When I chat with my brother on the phone and I say to him, Ron, you're not going to believe what happened? His response is usually “wha”. Why does he drop the T in what? Is he being lazy with his use of language?

Valerie Fridland:

No, it's not laziness and it's no more lazy than the fact that you say walk with no ‘l’ or often with no ‘t’. If you say night like the types with the swords and the jousting, if you say night instead of k-night, are you lazy because you dropped the K and the sound and you changed the vowel? No, it's just the natural evolution of language over time when normal processes of speech interact with social identity and become meaningful in some ways that speakers adopt it more wholesale. You shouldn't see someone that says “wha” as lazy, because it's the exact same kind of process.

Larry Bernstein:

In 1994, my boss assigned me to trade municipal bonds. I was first introduced to a municipal bond broker who called himself JB. Then I met Double G. My Merrill Lynch salesman introduced himself as TMB at the Bull.

So when I answered the phone, I began to refer to myself as LB. That was my new name. Two years later, in 1996, I was transferred to our proprietary trading in emerging markets. I went on my first overseas business trip to Asia, and I attended a conference with leading Asian finance ministers, economists and businessmen. They would say things like the so-called sovereign debt credit spreads have recently widened because of the so-called tequila crisis, which resulted in so-called losses. And I was baffled by the use of so-called that did not enhance the information load of a sentence and was a distraction.

Valerie Fridland:

Some sort of hedge.

Larry Bernstein:

When I returned to the US, I started answering the phone as “so-called LB.” What do you make of that?

Valerie Fridland:

<laugh> First, that's a great story. I think what you're talking about is how different communities get these different markers that are deeply tied to their social identities. And particularly when we get into groups that are formed through work or clubs or activities, we find that they often develop something called a language of practice or a community of practice. Language is a beautiful way of signaling in-group status in those communities.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about as it relates to language?

Valerie Fridland:

I'm optimistic that we are moving in the right direction with language, even though I think people cringe at these new forms. And it's because the innovations that we hear in the language around us start with speaker groups that tend to be disfavored social classes or ethnic groups. English is a living language. We want it to change. If it's not changing, it's Latin, and let's just look at where Latin ended up. Inviting different influences into our language has been what made English the vibrant language it is today.

It is the natural course of language to evolve, and we should embrace it rather than be afraid of it. The things we hate in language today are born of specific cultural moments and ideas and in the long view of history, they do not matter. Linguistic decay is a creation that we have based on these norms that we've idealized in our heads about what language should be, but it's really not about what language is. Just think of them as that pair of boots that are hard at first, but one day they'll be your favorite boots to wear around. I'm optimistic about the future of our language.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Valerie for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was How to Make a Good Apology. Our speaker was Edwin Battistella who is the author of the book Sorry about That: The Language of Public Apology.

I am fascinated by apologies and what makes a good one and why some fall flat. It is more than just words as it must include true contrition. Mistakes are made, so let's find out how to make more effective mea culpas.

We also welcomed back my buddy Darren Schwartz who is the What Happens Next movie critic. Darren weighed in on the success and failures of apologies, and he reviewed 9-time Oscar nominated movie Banshees of Inisherin because apology and forgiveness is at the core of that film.

I also want to make a plug for next week's show with Jennifer Sciubba and her book 8 Billion and Counting as I am very interested in demographics and the political implications of it. You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com.

Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.
Thank you for joining me, good-bye.