The Continuing Evolution of English
What Happens Next - 04.13.2024

Larry Bernstein:
Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and education.

Today's topic is the Continuing Evolution of English.

Our speaker today is Anne Curzan who is the Dean of Literature, Science and Arts at the University of Michigan and the author of Says Who? A Kinder, Funner Usage Guide for Everyone Who Cares About Words.

This is the second part of a two-part series on English grammar.

Today's session will focus on the use of jargon with insiders, the changing pronunciation of words, teaching grammar to kids, and the introduction of new words to the English language.

Let's begin with a question:

When I started the podcast, the objective was to learn more about COVID, and the medical issues associated with it. I thought I would get speakers with medical expertise and what better way than finding leading authors in medical journals. I subscribed to the New England Journal of Medicine, Lancet and JAMA. I got to read these articles and see if the authors are worthy of What Happens Next.

I had not previously actively read scientific journals. What I found was the actual ideas were not complex and I could understand them, but the use of language, jargon and style made it unappealing to a broader audience. It was challenging. Why couldn't they say this in a way in plain English so that a bright, interested individual could both understand it, be challenged by it, and take something away?

In my field finance, financial documents like annual reports, were written in such a way that the lawyers turned into meaningless gruel. Warren Buffett complained to the SEC that they had failed in their objectives of educating shareholders, and that the SEC adopt plain English. How do you think about the adoption of plain English in technical fields?

Anne Curzan:
What are the goals of the genre, who is the audience when we think about what language is going to be most effective? Every field has its jargon, and jargon often carries a negative connotation with it because jargon establishes insiders and outsiders.

Some jargon is helpful. It is a shorthand. We all have a common understanding of what those words mean, and it lets us move more quickly within a specialized technical space. But we do need to recognize that it can exclude others. And this is true of finance as much as it is true of linguistics and medicine.

Are there times to allow highly specialized people within a field to write and talk to each other? I think arguably, yes. It is also helpful to have other genres or outlets where we are writing in more accessible language to a broader audience so that they also can have that information? Absolutely. And I have been pleased to see both journals and online venues such as The Conversation, which is encouraging academics to write relatively short, accessible, fully informed scholarly pieces that someone who is not a specialist can read and understand. I do not know if I would use the phrase plain English. I feel like that phrase can mean different things to different people. I think that rhetorical flourishes, jokes, narratives can be fun. And sometimes plain English is meant to restrict the use of those rhetorical flourishes. Those can be engaging in a way to make things more accessible.

Larry Bernstein:
In your book Says Who? you use humor. You talk about “very important,” and then you would slip in “very important” in the next paragraph. And then just to make sure you did not miss it, you'd break the fourth wall and say, I just used very important.

And then sometimes you are speaking directly to the listener you will say something like “I'm talking to you, apostrophe.” I do not know who you are talking to there, but you're at the fifth wall. How do you think about that informality as a use of humor to engage your audience?

Anne Curzan:
Thank you for reading the book so carefully. I love the aside. It's a really fun rhetorical device. And you're right, I absolutely use it in the book where I am playing with language to model for readers, even as you're trying to make a serious point that one can still be playful. And as part of that playing, I will sometimes point out my own language.

One of the other reasons I am pointing out my own language is to indicate to readers that I made a rhetorical choice there. In case you were wondering, I am aware that I just did that, and I did it for a reason. At those moments, some readers may feel cranky because I will get emails back to

me and someone will say to me, “I can't believe that you Anne Curzan could do this in your writing.” And then I will write back to explain why that was a rhetorical choice.

Larry Bernstein:
I want to talk about learning grammar as a student. I went to New Trier in Winnetka Illinois and Warriner's English grammar book was used but not much. It was a couple of weeks in junior high, a couple of weeks in high school. And there was an expectation that we should have known this material in advance.

When the unit was over, it was forgotten. Many of the ideas in your book were covered in those sessions, less and fewer, that and which, the use of the comma. And they use the finger and said, “you can't do that.”

Anne Curzan:
Who and whom -

Larry Bernstein:
Then the only time it ever came up again, when I was taking the SATs, there was another test. I do not remember the name of it, but there was an English language grammar test that did not count.

Anne Curzan:
I remember this absolutely.

It was the sort of which sentence is better. And you had to look at these two sentences and decide whether something was wrong with one of them.

Larry Bernstein:
Why do we learn grammar that way? Is grammar still taught that way? If you have a child and you are concerned about their proper use of grammar, what would you recommend? And if you were going to recommend to the K-12 academy, what would you suggest that they do differently?

Anne Curzan:
Right now, from what I can tell, we aren't seeing a lot of grammar instruction in general in K through 12. And the instruction that is there is largely prescriptive. You described it as with the finger wagging, that it's largely do this, don't do this, without much discussion, without anyone having a chance to say, Says Who? Where did that come from? Why am I not allowed to use

“ain't” in a paper or whatever the question is? I would love to see us approach language arts education the same way that we approach the sciences and social sciences in K through 12.

I want to credit my colleague Kirk Hazen, who recently retired from West Virginia University. And his point was, let's talk with kids about how dialects work, how language changes, why do different people speak in different ways? It would keep kids curious about language. When people find out what I do and I say, I can answer things like why colonel is spelled with an L and pronounced with an R.

You can see people want to know the answer to that. Wait, what? There's an answer to that question? We could teach kids that way because being an effective writer is being careful about language. It's caring about the choices you make.

Kids are willing to master rules. When you think about video games, they master a huge set of arbitrary rules to play video games. If you say this is a set of rules, not for the only correct way to use language, but for the way to use language in school settings that is valued, my experience is that students will learn that. And let them teach me a set of rules that I don't know very well. For example, texting rules. I have learned so much from young people over the years about how to use punctuation in texting. For example, that the period is angry.

If you teach me how to use the period in texting, I'll teach you how to use the semicolon in academic writing.

Larry Bernstein:
But you don't have to take a quiz.

Anne Curzan
It's true, I don't have to take a quiz. But I get judged.

Larry Bernstein:
A few years ago, I turned to my business partner, and I said, it happened. Banal (rhymes with anal) is now pronounced more than 50 % versus banal (bə-‘nal), which rhymes with canal. Given that it's gone majority banal, will you change your pronunciation? And he said, no, I'm not going to do it. No, you go ahead, you do it.

Your choice of how you pronounce that word reflects your social class, who you are and want to be. I'm sticking with banal (bə-‘nal), which rhymes with canal. How do you think about dialect, choice of vocabulary usage in defining your social and intellectual class?

Anne Curzan:

That is a big question. Let's start with the fact that there are dialects. Every single one of us has an accent and speaks a dialect. There are people who speak a dialect that is closer to the standardized variety of American English, who believe they do not speak a dialect. And they will talk about other people with dialects, but they do not have a dialect. But the fact is every single one of us speaks a dialect. It just may be that your dialect is closer to the standardized variety.

A dialect includes accent as well as grammatical differences, lexical differences. And our dialects reflect the communities we belong to. And those communities can be geographic communities, they can also be social communities. And dialects are important parts of our identity. One of the questions I often get is, are American dialects going to die? Are we all going to start talking the same way because we have the internet, we have television that we all participate in.? Linguists have been studying this and it looks like the answer is no. That if anything, dialect differences in the United States are getting stronger because people do not want to sound all the same. They want to sound like the communities that they come from.

Many speakers have learned to code switch. That is what we would call it in linguistics, which is to move among dialects of English or between or among languages as speakers, because they know that different dialects will be valued or judged differently in different contexts. People will move in between them because in your question was a reality of our social worlds, which is that some dialects get judged very harshly as somehow being uneducated or unsophisticated or wrong in a variety of ways. I hope people will get out of Says Who? the idea that dialect variation is part of the diversity of us as speakers and that these varieties are linguistically systematic. They are all grammatical. There is nothing wrong with them except that in some cases socially we have attached judgments or stigmas to some varieties over others.

The other is questions about what variation we notice and what kinds we don't. We could think about pronunciation, vowels, for example. If someone says, Larry, can I borrow your pin to refer to something that I would call a pen? Many of us would say, that speaker is Southern. We have an association with that merger in pin and pen as being reflective of Southern varieties of English. But if someone said, I caught the ball we might not at least consciously think that person just said something that means they might be from the Western part of the United States. There is another merger that's happening in the United States, which is the merger of the two vowels in caught as in something you would sleep in and caught as in I caught the ball. Now I'm from the East Coast, which means I have two different vowels, caught and caught.

My first academic job was at the University of Washington in Seattle. And my students there had almost all merged that vowel. And for them, it was caught, caught. They had never noticed that I had different vowels until the day that we talked about dialect variation. And I said, “there's this merger going on of caught and caught. And I have two different vowels.” They said, “you do? They said, say the two words.” And I said, “caught, caught.” And the students suddenly, they say

to me, “you say caught, caught? That sounds so funny.” But of course, they had not noticed it until that day when I said, I have not undergone that merger. We have variation that we notice because it is socially marked. We have variation that we don't notice, although at some point it may rise to the level where we notice it.

Larry, I'm going to ask you a question, which is the little star that on a keyboard is Shift -8.

Larry Bernstein:
Asterisk.

Anne Curzan:
You have a first S, but not a second S. If you look at how it's spelled, it is asterisk. There are, I think at least four pronunciations in circulation of this word. One is asterisk, people who say it the way it is spelled. One is “asteric,” the way you said it, where we have deleted the S. Another is “asterix,” where the K and the S have switched places. That is my pronunciation.

I have swapped the K and the S. Some people have gotten rid of the K, so it's asterisk.

My guess is that you have not been judged in your life for being an asterisk speaker. And I do not think that I have been judged for being an asterisk speaker. But there is another swapping of the K and the S that is highly judged. And this is speakers who say, ask a question rather than axe a question. That is a feature of African American English and it is highly stigmatized.

It is very surprising to people when they learn that both axe and ask are very old in the history of English. And from what we can tell, it is likely that the swapping of the K and the S was actually from axe to ask. And if you read Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, you will find axe a question spelled A -X -E.

It was a high form through about the 16th century. It is now a stigmatized form. That is a social judgment. It's not a linguistic judgment. And it's interesting to look at Ask-Axe next to asterisk “asteric” in terms of what people decide to notice and stigmatize and what they don't.

Larry Bernstein:
My wife and I moved to Tokyo in 1998. And when I went to work, my wife went to Japanese language classes. When I got home one day, I said, what did you learn today in your Japanese class? And she said, I learned how to say shower curtain in Japanese. I said, that is amazing. How do you say shower curtain in Japanese?

“Shawa Katan.”

It turns out the Japanese language does not have the word shower curtain. And the Japanese co-opted the English expression, but they Japanized it. They used it in a way so that it would ring true to the Japanese ear. How do we English speakers adopt foreign words into our language and then how do we use them in ways that is consistent with English grammar and general use?

Anne Curzan:
We do exactly the same thing, which is that we will often make borrowed words follow patterns of English pronunciation. That could be changing the vowels slightly so that they correspond more to English vowels, especially if it's a language that has vowels that are different from ours, as well as consonants. It can also mean shifting the stress. And one of my favorite complaints from the 19th century is from Samuel Rogers who was complaining about the pronunciation balcony, which he thought was just awful. And what had happened, balcony was borrowed from Italian. And in Italian, the stress is on the second syllable, balcony. But English as a Germanic language tends to have the stress on the first syllable which means that over time English speakers shifted the stress to get balcony rather than balcony. So, you will see borrowed words call it Englishified in their pronunciation and shift meaning over time because all words shift meaning. What they meant in the language we borrowed them from may start to become a distant memory as they take on a life in English.

Larry Bernstein:
I sympathize with foreign speakers learning English, given the number of irregular verbs and the lack of hard rules in usage. How do foreigners learn English? Is it easy?

Anne Curzan:
I have two answers to that. The first is that the reason most people are learning English is for social, political, and economic reasons. That it is a language that gives you access to political, social, and economic power at this moment in our history, and therefore people will learn it. If we needed to learn another language for those reasons, we would learn that other language. Many speakers who come to English as a second or foreign language will say that it is not the hardest language to learn. There are aspects of our grammar that are not as complicated as languages, for example, with case. English used to have case. Many other languages, Latin, German, Russian, still have case where if a noun is a subject, a direct object, an indirect object, a possessor, it takes a different ending.

We no longer have that, so we do not need to distinguish whether it's a subject or an object. The only thing that is left is that possessive S. There are also languages like Russian that have complicated verb systems in terms of verbs of motion. English also does not have grammatical gender. We used to have grammatical gender; we no longer do. I wrote my dissertation about this, but all nouns in English used to be masculine, feminine, or neuter.

We lost this around the same time we lost case. There are parts of English grammar that learners of the language will say are complicated. For example, our prepositional system. There are a lot of prepositions in English. They are often highly idiomatic. And I remember when I taught English in China for a couple of years, my students would ask me, “What's the difference between a story of and a story about?” And I would think that is a really good question or why is it due to, but because of? There are all these idiomatic ways that we use prepositions that you have to learn.

Larry Bernstein:
Shakespeare was incredibly successful in creating new words and catchy phrases. How did he do it?

Anne Curzan:
Shakespeare, from what we can tell, had a great ear for the language around him. One of the important distinctions there is to think about what words did he record for the first time versus what words did he make up? And much of it, from what we can tell, is that he recorded words that were being used around him but had not yet been recorded in the written language.

That is a great ear. Because if he were just making up lots of words, his audience would not have understood them. And that would not make it for a very good play. Now the place where he may have been more playful and made-up words is in places where an audience would still be able to figure it out And you will see that playfulness in Shakespeare where he is taking a word that's historically been one part of speech, making it another part of speech, but the context will make it clear what that means in context. So it's a new word, but it's one that people can interpret.

Larry Bernstein:
In the last chapter of your book, it goes in a new path, writing better. We have been playing with grammar, word choice, vocabulary, dialect, double negation, commas, and apostrophes. Suddenly it is let's look at some examples of writing and let's make it better. Is this your next book?

Anne Curzan:
As someone who has taught writing for years, I will admit that I sometimes say to students your writing is choppy. When we think about choppiness, one of the things that is often happening is that we are introducing new information in a place where readers may not expect it. That if you look at patterns in where we tend to introduce old information and new information, often old information comes in subject position and new information comes out in the predicate. And readers being brought up short when they come to a subject and its new information and they

think, wait, wait, wait, I wasn't expecting this right here. It's not that it's grammatically wrong. It's not that it broke some rule, but it may have surprised your reader.

Larry Bernstein
I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the proper use of grammar?

Anne Curzan:
I am always optimistic about young people. I was teaching a class this semester called in defense of quote unquote bad English. And I will sometimes hear people say young people today do not care about the details of language. They are careless. They are sloppy. It is absolutely not true. They delight in language. They are very savvy users of language in social media and texting, very nuanced in the way they think about that and eager to acquire other ways of using language in other contexts. So, I am deeply optimistic about young people.

Larry Bernstein:
Thanks to Anne for joining us today.

If you missed Part 1 of our Anne Curzan series the topic was Bad Grammar. We will discuss the ongoing changes in proper usage of words, the growing importance of Microsoft Word Grammar Checker, how to effectively use dictionaries, and the role of non-native speakers in the evolution of the English language.

I would now like to make a plug for next week's podcast with Stefan Timmermans who is a medical sociologist at UCLA and the author of a new book entitled The Unclaimed: Abandonment and Hope in the City of Angels. The topic will be the shocking number of dead Americans who go unclaimed at the city morgue, and what this says about our society and the decision to live alone away from family.

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Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.