Getting Started

Words (and meaningful silences) matter enormously in our lives. They enable us to cooperate, collaborate, and ally with one another – as well as to exclude, exploit, and subordinate one another. They script our performances as certain kinds of people in certain social locations. They are politically powerful, both as dominating weapons that help oppress and as effective tools that can resist oppression. But words in and of themselves are impotent. It is the socially structured practices and historically situated circumstances constituting our social lives that pour content into words, endow them with meaning and power.

This book explores how such meaning-making works. It does so by examining a number of concrete examples of linguistic practices, many of them very current. I am writing it not for specialists, although I hope some may find it useful, but for anyone willing to join me in examining critically their own ideas about language and its complicated connections to social conflict and change. As that invitation suggests, I am also writing it to help clarify my own understanding of these often complex and contentious issues. I do not expect that readers will always agree with my perspectives, either before or after reading the book. But I do hope they will, as I have tried to do, rethink familiar assumptions.

Do ‘politically correct’ efforts to change or regulate language sometimes go too far? Why do people keep changing the labels they use to identify themselves? Isn’t speaking ‘grammatically’ important anymore? What does it mean to say that certain words or ways of speaking are ‘sexist’ or ‘racist’? What might be meant by ‘hate speech’ or ‘dangerous speech’? Are there words or ways of speaking that should be abandoned, maybe even
outlawed? Does ‘free speech’ license saying anything at all in any context? What might be effective strategies for ‘counter speech’ to help defuse words that increase social tensions? How are new words, new meanings, or new ways of using familiar words authorized, ‘legitimated’ as part of a shared language?

I explore these and similar issues with as little technical apparatus, jargon, and ideological bias as possible and lay out my own commitments as clearly as I can. I do include some notes at the end of each chapter, but they mainly give information about sources and occasional suggestions for further reading, so feel free to ignore them. My emphasis is on everyday linguistic encounters of many different kinds. I hope that readers who are not already in the habit of noticing linguistic details of their own experience will begin to do so more often, mining their own observations for new insights into social life.

Although I occasionally range further afield, most (not all) of my illustrative cases feature the US and practices involving the English language. This geographic and linguistic parochialism reflects my own limitations as well as biases in the research literature. I hope that those with interests in other parts of the world and other languages may nonetheless find this book relevant.

I entered the field of linguistics via logic and the philosophy of language. Abstracting away from the social identities of language users and from their relations to one another, these fields were able to enrich understanding of some important aspects of linguistic meaning, of how languages allow us humans to put complex and novel messages out in the public domain. The focus of much of this work has been on understanding the direct, face-to-face, linguistic transmission of information between interchangeable individuals presumed to be cooperating with one another. But it was far from clear how to make sense of the role of linguistic practices in social institutions and in social conflict and change. And that’s what we needed in order to understand why social activists were so concerned about linguistic matters.
Beginning with black civil rights activists after World War II, identity-based groups began to ‘politicize’ everyday social relations, including linguistic practices. Many other identity-focused social movements soon followed: second-wave feminism, gay and lesbian rights activism expanding to other sexuality and gender-identity groups, panethnic movements like those initiated by Asian Americans or Latinos/Hispanics. Students in college classrooms were suggesting that what we older folks thought of as ‘just semantic conventions’ worked to the disadvantage of particular oppressed groups. The young women we were teaching, for example, did not always feel their experiences were being considered in courses with titles like “Man and His Place in Nature.” “Black is beautiful,” proclaimed some activists, and the label Negro began to fade away. “But don’t they [!] want to be called African American now?” some white person would chime in. More recently, opponents to extending the right to marry to couples other than those consisting of one man and one woman relied on legally ratified ‘definitions’ of marriage to support their position. And so on. How to think about linguistic politics was not immediately obvious to those of us trained in formal semantics, pragmatics, or the philosophy of language. At least not to me.

Many researchers in linguistics and philosophy of language, however, have recently moved toward work that transforms the abstract isolated individual speaker into a socially situated being interacting with others. These new directions are exciting and inspiring not only to me but to young people entering our disciplines, whose work has been crucial in developing more socially realistic theories of language and linguistic communication. Increasingly, investigators are drawing on existing tools, and also developing new ones, to explore and to theorize social dimensions of meaning. This book draws heavily on such recent work, as is clear from both my acknowledgments and the references I cite.

A major impetus for these explorations has been political activism around everyday uses of language. Ideas of everyday people – people who are not linguists or language specialists – about the linguistic resources they encounter and about their own
linguistic actions and reactions have prompted those of us in our ivory towers to rethink our sometimes simplistic accounts. There has also been an increased willingness among linguists and philosophers to consider ideas about meaning from colleagues in other academic disciplines: social theorists, anthropologists, social and cognitive psychologists, literary scholars, and more. My discussion in this book of why and how words matter for our social relationships draws not only from my own disciplines but, more than is usual for a ‘language’ person, from studies in social theory, psychology, history, and other areas. I do this in part to show how deeply embedded language is in our lives.

Readers may sometimes not approve of the words I have put – or failed to put – on these pages. In general, I try to walk a middle line. For the most part I avoid recent coinages that will be unfamiliar to many readers – for example, I wait until the final chapter to discuss Latinx as a possible non-gendered alternative to Latina and Latino. But throughout the book, I choose they instead of he or she to refer to someone whom I know does not want the standard gendered pronouns used for them and also as a default gender-neutral form of reference. (I confess that I still sometimes find they in speaking of a specific individual far from easy. This was recently confirmed when a university search committee asked me to write a recommendation with no gendered references to the candidate.) I discuss pronoun controversies in the sixth chapter, returning to the issue in the final chapter.

Given that this is a book about language, sometimes I mention words I myself might be reluctant to use. Let me illustrate this distinction. Speaking of a fastidious old friend in my play-reading group, I might say “She always said damn when there was a fuck in the script, which made it hard in most contemporary plays for her to read parts with any sense of authenticity.” I have mentioned damn and fuck but could go on to use them by saying something like, “But she was a damn good reader even if she was a bit fucked up.” I italicized the mentions above. In speech and in much writing, however, there is no distinction between a word and its name, the word we use to mention it. So someone hearing or
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seeing a metalinguistic mentioning of a word is not fully insulated from effects that might be produced by uses of the word.¹ I try to minimize mentions of words likely to wound or otherwise annoy some readers. I cannot avoid them altogether, however, and be clear. Of course, one of the issues the book addresses is debate over avoiding words because of possible offense to some.

This book is organized around three broad kinds of social and linguistic actions and practices. The first three chapters focus on what I sometimes call identifying, linguistic practices centering on labels for social identities. The next two emphasize what I call placing, using language to push one another around the social landscape. And then there are two chapters highlighting change and disputes about it. They deal more with language about language – metalinguistic actions and practices – and with how social arrangements, including power relations, affect success in metalinguistic projects. The concluding chapter of the book discusses more case studies in light of the perspectives emerging from the preceding discussion.

I have used gerund forms, a verb plus the suffix -ing, for chapter titles. I do this to emphasize that it is linguistic practices that are our focus, not static linguistic structures. Linguistic practices are socially recognized ways of acting or doing in which words figure centrally: wearing name tags at a social event, engaging in rap battles, standing and singing “God Save the Queen,” quoting a dictionary definition or a passage from a grammar book to ‘win’ an argument, and so on. We do not all recognize or participate in the same linguistic practices: they are tied to particular communities. These communities can be small face-to-face ones like church choirs or book clubs, or they can be very large ‘imagined’ ones like nations.² I have organized this book around a range of illustrative examples, both very contemporary and from centuries past. My aim is to show some of the complexities of social meaning-making in action.

Identity politics is often mentioned with disdain, and it is also associated with bringing linguistic questions into focus, often in
ways that outsiders mock. Although I early on recognized and endorsed what became known as intersectionality, the idea that, for example, racial and gender identities inflect one another, I knew far less than I wanted to about how this worked. (My often ‘unmarked’ whiteness made it all too easy to ignore my own racial identity.)

I realized that I had avoided discussing race, and more generally that I had done little to further understanding of talk about social identities as such. So that seemed the place to start this book.

Labeling, the first chapter, explores why and how sorting and tagging people with social-identity labels matters, given the historically contingent and changing nature of those identities. The second chapter, Marking/Erasing, looks at linguistic practices through which some identity groups dominate others and through which such dominance gets challenged. Generalizing, the third chapter, looks at the continuing significance of social identities and the need to speak about them even when they are socially constructed and not inherent in unalterable ‘scientific’ facts.

The next two chapters are less focused on identifying social groups and their members and more on individual social actors using words to position and reposition one another in a social landscape. The fourth chapter, Addressing, draws attention to everyday linguistic practices in which we participate with one another, the social significance of which we often overlook and which sometimes is only evident through statistical patterns. Putting Down, the fifth chapter, was another challenge to myself to think about hard and uncomfortable questions. What I found especially important here was realizing that the significance of, for example, explicit racial slurs goes far beyond their direct effects on targets they aim to subordinate. They often function in the absence of those targets to recruit potential allies for racist projects.

The topic of linguistic reform has already been foreshadowed by the earlier chapters, but the sixth and seventh chapters put these matters center stage. Linguists often say that languages...
change “in response to” social change, but of course such changes don’t happen without human agency, which is sometimes but not always intentional and often encounters explicit opposition. Reforming/Resisting, the sixth chapter, looks at some specific reform proposals that show clearly the embedding of linguistic practices in social practices and arrangements more generally. The seventh chapter, Authorizing, tackles disputes over semantic authority, over controlling what words mean.

The arc of the book moves through shared social identities to interpersonal jockeying for position to explicit struggles over changing language. Because I am trying to show the complexity of linguistic politics I rarely issue definitive pronouncements or produce clear summaries of ‘morals’ to be drawn. In keeping with that stance, the eighth and final chapter, Concluding, does not emphasize drawing ‘conclusions.’ Rather, building on the ideas developed throughout the book, it opens discussion of some difficult ongoing questions through examining several more specific cases.

Words matter enormously, but often mainly because they bring into the light of day attitudes, assumptions, and actions that ground social relations and arrangements. They make public ideas, hopes and plans, commitments, values, and affiliations. Sometimes what’s made public is only covert, thus at least in principle deniable. Still, linguistic awareness helps uncover what’s happening. It helps challenge and disturb existing power relations. Linguistic and social change go hand in hand because linguistic practices are fundamental to social practices more generally. Words are woven into the social fabric.

Notes

1. “Talking about Slurs,” an unpublished paper that philosopher Cassie Herbert kindly shared with me, offers a number of excellent reasons to avoid even mentioning very offensive language.
2. See Anderson 1983 for the notion of imagined communities.