

## How We Talk about Language

The most important challenges humans face – identity, life, death, war, peace, the fate of our planet – are manifested and debated through language. This book provides the intellectual and practical tools we need to analyze how people talk about language, how we can participate in those conversations, and what we can learn from them about both language and our society. Along the way, we learn that knowledge about language and its connection to social life is not primarily produced and spread by linguists or sociolinguists, or even language teachers, but through everyday conversations, online arguments, creative insults, music, art, memes, Twitterstorms – any place language grabs people’s attention and foments more talk. An essential new aid to the study of the relationship between language, culture, and society, this book provides a vision for language inquiry by turning our gaze to everyday forms of language expertise.

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# How We Talk about Language

## *Exploring Citizen Sociolinguistics*

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Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-48831-0 — How We Talk about Language  
Betsy Rymes  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108488310](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108488310)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108770194

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First published 2020

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-108-48831-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-72596-5 Paperback

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## Preface

### Being Meaningful

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Meaning may not be a precondition of humanity as much as a by-product of it.  
Douglas Rushkoff (2006, p. 8)

Very few will argue with the proposition that “meaning” is important. But what actually is “meaning” and how do we find it? In this book, I propose one way: by looking at talk about language. Talking about something as seemingly abstract as language (as opposed to something more palpable like life and death) might give the impression we are engaged in something meaningless: “That’s just talk.” But, while alive, *just talk* is our primary way of communicating our experiences. We consider the realities of “life” and “death” and make sense of all the events in between by labeling them with words and having a discussion – often about those very labels. *Meaning* results from these discussions. In this way, as Douglas Rushkoff remarks in the quote above, meaning emerges as a “by-product” of humanity rather than a “precondition” for it. How we talk about the world creates it in a way that is meaningful for us.

Exactly *how* we label and discuss our world can be an object both of critique and of wonderment. All animals die, but only humans can talk about it, and we have many different ways of doing so. The way we discuss the inevitability that we will all one day “kick the bucket,” “keel over,” “bite the dust,” “go gentle into that good night,” or modestly “pass away” can spark both criticism and awe. Someone might be accused of insensitivity for using the phrase “keel over” in one context, or of being overly oblique for using “pass away” in another. Like such moments of language critique, moments of wonderment – a blend of admiration and awe, maybe mixed with a little fear – can also lead us into talk about language: “Did you just say *kick the bucket*? Is that really how you describe someone’s death? Why? Who said that around you? Who still says that?” Such moments of wonderment and of critique can lead to conversations about language, about how we label and navigate (make sense of) our world. Whatever foments this talk about talk, be it the sting of critique or the spark of wonderment, these conversations map out our own uniquely human journey of talking meaning into being.

Talking about each other's language can be painful too, especially if such talk reveals deep-seated differences and brings out harsh judgments. Sometimes, feeling shame or confusion in the face of critique, we avoid talking about our language, or even thinking about it. We may even use language in certain ways to deliberately ward off critique. This raises an ever-present tension between *talk as a shield* that keeps us from meaningfully engaging with perspectives other than our own and *talk as an invitation*, an opening for communication. Most people don't want to use language, ostensibly a tool of communication and creative expression, in ways that drain it of meaning, alienate people around them, or build barriers. However, much of our socialization as humans forces us to develop a way of using language that does just that. Often, as we learn to be part of a community, we build ourselves a cocoon of locally standardized language that encases us in familiarity. As we grow and develop as part of a specific social group with set purposes, our language potentially becomes even more standardized and specialized.

Paradoxically, this socialization into standardized ways of speaking, a process that facilitates mutual intelligibility, can also function to build language barriers around people who view "correct" or even "meaningful" language in different ways. An embrace of standardized or otherwise isolating ways of speaking and thinking can be a warning sign of looming closed-mindedness. When standardized ways of speaking and other rigid notions about how language should and should not be used dominate a conversation or go unquestioned, other voices, new languages and ways of speaking, locally relevant, original and zesty, disappear, and the most standardized of speakers will continue to cultivate their own isolation from those voices.

Reactions to language like critique and wonderment, however, can function as invitations to construct meaning together in new ways. The sting of critique or a spark of wonderment can bring on conversations about language that take down barriers between groups of speakers by raising awareness about how language builds meaning differently in different contexts. Talk about language provides a means for *resistance to standardization* – resistance to the idea that there is some standardized form of expression that counts more than others. This resistance to the standardization of language, communication, and meaning-making does not in any way necessitate the rejection of clarity and insight of people who are well-spoken, or even those who might come off as pretentious or who self-righteously weaponize language. These voices contribute to an eternally morphing collection of perspectives best considered together. While we can use language as a shield from others, a way to build boundaries between all our tiny demographic comfort zones, talk *about* language opens up a way to engage meaningfully with other viewpoints and in the process develop shared understandings.

Discerning readers will certainly be wondering: What about those who talk about language in hateful and discouraging ways? What about those situations where talk about language entrenches discrimination and narrow-mindedness? Undeniably, people talk about language in ignorant ways that build barriers, stereotype other people, and close down conversations. This book will investigate those narrow, stereotyping, and potentially cruel remarks about language too – as well as the ways that everyday people extend those conversations rather than close them down. Carrying on these conversations about language provides one pathway to understanding the everyday, ramifying nature of our ideological differences.

The purpose of this book is to illustrate the various ways people enter into conversations about language and to suggest ways of promoting the everyday deliberation that can come from considering multiple perspectives and where they come from. This talk *about talk*, though it sounds so abstract and meta, may be the most real, down-to-earth, and uniquely human thing we do. This everyday talk about language comprises what I am calling *citizen sociolinguistics*, an approach to language that differs both from the standardized prescriptions you could get from a grammar book or style guide and the systematic description of language change that a trained sociolinguist might provide. Both standardized prescription and systematic description illuminate ways we humans make meaning through talk about language, but they represent only a tiny pinprick percentage of the infinite variety of conversations about language going on every day. Standardized prescriptions for how language should work, or systematized descriptions of how language changes, are rarely the goal of the everyday conversations about language that are the focus of this book. Instead, citizen sociolinguistic dialogue usually emerges from moments of critique or wonderment, when language appears to lack precision or systematicity, when we discover its inherent idiosyncrasy or unexpected nuttiness, or the way it leads to ruptures in understanding – all this makes us start talking about how language works in our lives for us and the people around us, expanding our awareness of language difference and social distinction in the process. In what follows, I hope to guide readers along on this collaborative production of meaning that can be sparked when we talk about language. The production of meaning never stops and everyday talk about language will not end on the last page of this book. But I hope, as you journey through these pages, you'll accept this invitation to think in new ways about *How We Talk about Language*, and its role in making meaning.

