

## Is Language 🤔!?

In a historic and controversial move, Oxford Dictionaries recently selected the “Face With Tears of Joy” emoji as the 2015 “Word of the Year.” Although there is validity to the ensuing criticisms that this emoji is indeed not a word, and therefore should not have been chosen, Oxford’s decision and the public’s response reveal two significant things: communication is experiencing a rapid evolution in the modern era, and these changes are largely being met with resistance. The public outcry surrounding Internet language is not reserved for emojis – the abbreviations and slang that define text messaging and online discourse have been the subject of alarmist rhetoric relating to supposed threats to literacy and concerns that young people are no longer capable of writing and speaking English “properly.” Emerging forms of online communication challenge our culture’s predominant narrative of linguistic prescriptivism, weaken the social hierarchies perpetuated by such elitism, and expand humanity’s capacity for meaningful connection.

Language is our most vital tool for making and sharing meaning, a system so fundamental that it is easy to forget that our current understanding of it is by no means an inevitability. The predominant narrative that dictates the role of language in modern society is that of linguistic prescriptivism, which emphasizes “proper” and “correct” uses of language and identifies some perfect form for human beings to aspire to. Our standards of language usage are an example of what Nietzsche described as constructed truths “which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding” (455). A worldview guided by strict, unchanging

rules offers a comforting sense of stability and order, giving humanity the illusion of control. However, this linguistic elitism reflects a fundamental misunderstanding about what language is and how it functions. Some level of standardization is necessary to create mutual understanding, but these standards are subject to change and are not rooted in any universal truth. Knowing that words are, as Nietzsche described, nothing more than “arbitrary differentiations,” symbols with societally agreed upon meanings, it becomes apparent that “with words it is never a question of truth” (453). The rules of language are constructed by human beings and do not exist inherently in nature, meaning it is futile to regard the English language as some immovable entity whose purity must be preserved. Language is fluid, a product of the time and place in which it is used, continually changing to reflect an evolving society. New words must be adopted to describe social and technological advancements, existing words absorb new meanings, and slang terms emerge to unite communities, but these developments do not need to be seen as evidence that language is decaying and becoming corrupted. Language changes that do not service greater ease of communication do not persist, and those that remain do so because they are valuable and functional. A descriptive linguistic approach – one that is concerned with describing how language is actually used rather than prescribing rules – is therefore a more appropriate framework for understanding how language functions within human societies.

Accepting rigid parameters of language also has more sinister implications, as the philosophy of prescriptivism shapes an understanding of the world founded on hierarchies and exclusion. Societal practices as seemingly innocuous as the self-righteousness of self-proclaimed “grammar Nazis” contribute to the pervasive mentality that equates adherence to the established rules of language with a person’s level of intelligence and value. Nietzsche warned that

humanity's constructed concepts and attempts at creating truth are responsible for "the construction of a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees" (455). It is impossible to separate language from its political implications, and language elitism contributes to perpetuating existing power structures. So-called "Standard English" is very limited in nature and excludes dialects such as African-American Vernacular English, dismissing them as illegitimate. The ruling classes are able to maintain their control by serving as the gatekeepers of correct language usage, even when this occurs subconsciously. Conformity to the "proper" standards of writing and speaking functions as a prerequisite for success and upward mobility in this country, but the educational opportunities required to assimilate to these standards are often inaccessible for ethnic minorities, immigrants, and lower-income populations. As a result, marginalized groups often find it difficult to be taken seriously and have their voices heard in a society that favors the white upper and middle class. This is problematic on multiple levels: lack of education perpetuates cycles of poverty and oppression across generations, and the privileged fail to account for the possibility that intelligent, educated people may not be interested in conforming to a particular way of writing and speaking.

These purist attitudes not only solidify systems of privilege and oppression, but potentially lead us to lose sight of the true purpose of language – human communication and connection. When what is said becomes less important than how it is said, when substance is seen as secondary to stylistic concerns, we lose valuable opportunities to share stories across communities and groups. Empathy and compassion are only possible when we are willing to listen to the narratives of others without barriers or judgment. Adaptation is an essential feature of humanity, and suppressing language change has the potential to impede progress. Linguistic

elitism limits our potential production and acquisition of knowledge by impairing the free and open dialogue that is necessary to disrupt the status quo. That being said, a new narrative is emerging, one that contradicts the restrictive preoccupation with regulation and technicalities – the language of the Internet.

Online communication has developed its own set of rules in order to enable greater ease in the exchange of ideas and the development of relationships. The new forms of communication that have arisen with the help of digital media undermine the ability of constructed linguistic “truths” to define our social hierarchies. Emojis offer a primitive but nonetheless powerful universal language, creating systems of communication that rely on simply conveying emotion rather than constructing complex sentences. Text abbreviations, though they may be falling out of popularity somewhat, can be a convenient and practical time-saving measure. Users of social media platforms such as Twitter or Tumblr develop their own linguistic rules that defy conventional practices of punctuation and grammar, uniting users and establishing features of various subcultures. A smiley face or a “lol” can take on an ironic or passive-aggressive meaning in modern communication spheres, allowing these symbolic representations to transcend their ostensible purposes. All of these practices take advantage of the knowledge that “we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (Nietzsche 454). Since language is an illusion to begin with, there is nothing stopping us from repurposing our metaphors to better serve our modern communication needs.

It is unfair to attribute the unconventional habits of young people to laziness or ignorance – if anything, these emerging practices illustrate the inventive spirit that fuels online communication. As mediated communication becomes increasingly prevalent, human beings

have effectively established innovative methods of recreating the subtleties and emotion of face-to-face communication in new contexts, compensating for the loss of gestures, body language, and facial expressions. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, anyone with an Internet connection can be a contributor of published written material, leading to a rapid increase in the sheer volume of language production that renders extreme regulation impossible. The rising culture of mass-amateurization is destroying the supremacy of formal institutions and placing power in the hands of the common people, inviting them to define their own art forms, practices, and standards.

As we deconstruct humanity's attempts to define the world through the lens of our limited understanding, constructed metaphors, and invented truths, we can grasp new possibilities. Understanding the linguistic prescriptivism that guides today's rhetoric relating to communication, recognizing the arbitrary nature of language, identifying the social inequalities perpetuated by the prevailing elitism, remembering the compassion and progress linguistic shifts can enable, and exploring the potential of online communication practices to dismantle the boundaries imposed by a close-minded approach to language can allow us to confront the limitations of dominant attitudes and make us receptive to a continually changing landscape of communication. The "Face With Tears of Joy" emoji is an expression of unadulterated joy, and its prevalence should not be seen as an indictment of our culture, but rather a testament to the freedom and connection we have found by abandoning the strict confines that defined pre-Internet communication.

### Works Cited

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005. 451-461. Print.

