

Truthiness and the English language — popular perception and fall-out

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In this talk I draw on popular perceptions of the English language as revealed in personal letters, emails, online commentary and general feedback I have received during my nearly 30 years involvement with language programs for radio and television (e.g. weekly language segments for public and commercial talkback radio throughout Australia and (from 2006-11) the TV program *Can We Help* (<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/canwehelp/>)).

This work shows that even when linguists think they are getting the message across, people commonly fall back on what they “know” to be true. This comfortable knowledge often goes on to inform decisions that shape the life chances of others, affecting their employment opportunities, their social mobility, their personal relationships — and, as forensic linguists have shown, can even end up putting the wrong person in jail. Former federal court judge Peter Gray (2012) describes the fundamental ignorance on the part of most lawyers that there exists a profession concerned with the study of language, and he goes on to portray the legal distrust of those providing linguistic evidence. Deemed common knowledge, this evidence is often not even subject to expert evaluation (Fraser 2014). But there is no simple unmasking of the truth about language here – matters of privilege, power, traditional values and stereotypes make for powerful barriers to any “unmaking of ignorance” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2012). “Knowing stuff” isn’t enough.

For some time sociolinguists have been researching public opinion about language (e.g. Cameron 2012; Curzan 2014). The work I am reporting on here piggybacks on this research, and I hope is a further step towards a better and more constructive public discourse on linguistic issues, where language users (most especially educators, politicians, lawyers and those in the media) put well-researched principles of linguistics above what can be dangerously inaccurate views about how people speak (or should speak).

References

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