

## Who cares about language?

Do you care about language? Most people - certainly all readers of this quarterly - would instinctively say 'of course'. But that is the easy bit. The more difficult task comes next. Prove it!

How do we prove we care? It takes more than the occasional letter to the BBC complaining about a split infinitive. There are languages dying in Africa.

An analogy might help. How do we care about our car? It takes a combination of knowledge, sensitivity, time, and money.

- Knowledge, most obviously: we have to know how to drive, and the more we know about how cars work the more we will understand what we can do with them - their strengths and limitations. A car which performs well on city streets might not perform so well on mountainsides.
- But does knowledge alone make us good drivers? That requires something more - good sense, road awareness, and sensitivity towards other car users. We appreciate good driving, when we see it, and admire virtuoso performances, such as in formula 1.
- And to be a good driver, we have to work at it. The more we drive in different vehicles and circumstances - in different terrains, weathers, road conditions - the more experienced we become. All of this takes time. And money.

Now replace the 'car' words by 'language' words.

- Knowledge: we have to know how to use language, and the more we know about how languages work the more we will understand what we can do with them - their strengths and its limitations. A language which performs well on city streets might not perform so well on mountainsides.
- But does knowledge alone make us good language users? That requires something more - good sense, medium awareness, and sensitivity towards other language users. We appreciate good use of language, when we see it, and admire virtuoso performances, such as in literature.
- And to be a good language user, we have to work at it. The more we use language in different genres and circumstances - in different contexts, varieties, settings - the more experienced we become. All of this takes time. And money.

The analogy breaks down, eventually. We regularly clean and service our cars (or should do), but only a few purists try to clean up a language - and they invariably fail, for a language is something that collectively resides in the brains of all its users, and is under no single person's ownership. There is no such thing as a car with a million co-owners - or, as in the case of the English language, approaching two billion. The fashions that govern the movement of languages and the trends within a language are beyond the control of individuals, or even Academies. (This does not of course stop novelists, broadcasters, and other self-appointed guardians doing very well out of books which insist that everyone should speak or write like they do.)

There are some 6000 languages in the world, each of them expressing a different vision of what it means to be human, and each encapsulating a history and culture that

is like no other. They all need looking after, and we all need to care about them. But how do we approach such a large task? Linguistics, the science of language, is the subject that has developed a professional understanding, over the past two centuries, of what languages are, how they have evolved, how they are learned, and how they function in society. *How Language Works* is the story of what linguists have discovered, during that time.

We can ask the 'how' question of language as a whole, of languages as wholes, and of the parts of a language. We can ask it of sounds, spellings, words, and grammatical constructions. We can ask it of accents and dialects, mediums and styles, speaking and signing, reading and writing, children and adults, monolingualism and bilingualism. We can ask it of language when it is working very well, in such enterprises as conversation and literature, and also when it fails to work well, as in dyslexia and stammering.

To care for a language is to care for the people who use it - for there is no language without people. Language exists only in the mouths and ears and hands and eyes and brains of its users. And if people do not use it well, for whatever reason, then we should make every effort to understand how this has happened. Those of us who have been fortunate in having the opportunity to learn a language to a high standard, or - if we have been really lucky - more than one language - need to sympathize with those who have been less well served by education or circumstance, and who find themselves handicapped by their lack of opportunity or skill. Those of us who speak a healthy language, used by millions, need to remember the plight of the minority and endangered languages of the world, half of which are going to die out during this century.

So, do you have a linguistic temperament? If you do, you will find yourself responding positively to this checklist, which I limit to ten only because of illustrious precedents.

I *Are you concerned about endangered languages?* The concern can take many forms - aside from doing the actual work of linguistic documentation - such as lobbying for political support, providing help at community level, and fund-raising. A Foundation for Endangered Languages exists in the UK.

II *Are you concerned about minority languages, even if they are not in any global sense endangered?* Speakers of minority languages want to see their language treated with respect by the dominant culture; they want opportunities to use their language in public and see it valued. We can hardly take pride in the achievements of our own language while denying the same opportunity to others.

III *Are you interested in all accents and dialects within a language?* We need to celebrate the forms a language takes as it varies from one part of a country to another. You do not have to personally like all these forms, of course, any more than you have to like all kinds of music or literature. But linguistically aware people do not go round condemning some (usually urban) dialects as ugly, rough, or slovenly, or their speakers as unintelligent or criminal.

IV *Are you concerned about the expressive range of language?* This means valuing all varieties and styles in a language, whether spoken or written, formal or informal, regional or social, domestic or professional. The standard language is of critical

importance in ensuring national (and international) intelligibility; but other dialects are also critical in safeguarding local identity.

V *Are you multilingually minded?* There are still too many cultures which are monolingual in temperament. These are the disadvantaged ones. Although culturally dominant, reflecting their colonial pasts, they are missing out intellectually by failing to make a second language a routine part of growing up. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man'. Or woman. And the benefits, as people are beginning to learn, can be economic as well as personal.

VI *Do you accept change in language as a normal process?* This means not seeing it as decay and deterioration, and complaining about it to the press, the prime minister, or whoever will listen. There is probably more time wasted on this issue than on any other in the world of language. Language change is inevitable, continuous, universal, and multidirectional. Languages do not get better or worse, when they change. They just - change. The only languages that don't change are dead ones.

VII *Are you concerned about those who are having difficulties learning their mother-tongue?* As many as ten per cent of the child population can be affected by handicaps in listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Deafness, cleft palate, dyslexia, and language delay are just some of the conditions which form the world of the speech and language pathologists.

VIII *Are you concerned about those who have lost their ability to use a mother-tongue in which they were once proficient?* This is the language pathology world also, but now we are talking about the linguistic consequences of strokes, and other forms of brain damage, chiefly among the adult population. Aphasia is one of the best-known syndromes.

IX *Do you want to foster the link between the study of language and the study of literature?* All too often, schools, universities, and language-teaching institutions introduce a sharp boundary between the two domains. 'The language' is taught in one class; 'the literature' in another. We need to allow more language awareness into the literature class, and more literary examples into the language class. Both sides, after all, have a focus on creativity. The creation of new words and sentences is how a language develops and changes; the creation of new discourses is how literature does.

X *Do you truly appreciate the value of language in human development and society?* Languages should be thought of as national treasures, and treated accordingly. There should be a permanent 'exposition' devoted to language in every city. At present, in Britain, there is not a single one.

Whether your answer to the items in this decalogue was yes or no, the issues remain. And the data we need to discuss these issues is gathered together, to the best of my ability, in *How Language Works*.