Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring Quarter 2004. Handout 9.

1. Possibly coming attractions:

What can we learn from mistakes in language?
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CSP 1-unit (5-meeting) course proposed for spring 2005

Everybody makes inadvertent errors in language: you mean to say "Your shoe is untied"
but come out with "Your foot is untied" or "Your too is untied"; you write or type
"jumumble" instead of "jumble"; you hear "a viable solution" as "a buyable solution".
These errors aren't random, but result from fallible processes of producing and
understanding language, interacting with an enormous amount of detailed knowledge
about how your language works.

This course asks the question: What would people have to know to make mistakes of the
sort they do? The idea is to get beyond saying that people cannot do something and
instead to describe what they do and hypothesize why.

We'll start with inadvertent errors by normally competent adults and then broaden our
scope by looking at data from language disorders (aphasias, in particular), from children
learning their first language, and from second-language learners. Finally, we'll look at
things many people think are the truest examples of mistakes in language: deviations
from formal versions of standard dialects, where social factors play a central role.

2. Recap: Some features of the advice literature.
　　　　2.1. It's largely corrective.
　　　　2.2. Hence, reactive.
　　　　2.3. Hence, not necessarily predictive.
　　　　2.4. It's inclined to be "protective" – against innovations, regionalisms,
colloquial and conversational features, nonstandard features.
　　　　2.5. It's subject to fashion, fixing on certain items (*hopefully*, *infer* for *imply*,
nominative coordinate object pronouns, *nucular*, etc.) while disregarding many others.
　　　　2.6. It minimizes variation in favor of uniformity:
　　　　　　　　a. By barring features from occurring in formal (written) language.
　　　　　　　　b. By barring features from occuring in the language **in general**.
　　　　　　　　c. By discriminating between alternatives according to meaning
(*partly*/*partially*) or context (restrictive relative *which*/*that*).
　　　　　　　　d. By making arbitrary choices.
　　　　2.7. It's inclined to privilege its choices by rationalizing them. (As a result, some
people willfully fail to understand stigmatized variants, in an abandonment of the usual
"contract of generosity".)

3. Going nucular.
3.1. "Fresh Air" commentary from 10/2/02 (now revised in Nunberg 2004): "There are two kinds of linguistic missteps, the typos and the thinkos. Typos are the processing glitches that intercede between a thought and its expression. They can make you look foolish, but they aren't really the signs of an intellectual or ethical deficiency, the way thinkos are. It's the difference between a sentence that expresses an idea badly and a sentence that expresses a bad idea."

3.2. Fay/Cutler malapropisms (1977): **typos**

INTENDED	SPOKEN
denomination	determination
work	week
verb	vowel
diverged	deserved
Sunday	summer

AMZ's partner, 12/10/00, about cleaning eyeglasses: They treat them with some sort of cannibal [chemical], but it doesn't do any good.

3.3. Classical malapropisms (Zwicky 1980, 1982): **thinkos** ("false knowledge")
... like social psychology, behest [beset] with all these experiments
There's a connection, no matter how obtuse [obscure] it is.
the holocaustic [holophrastic] stage in language acquisition
The policeman threw an accordion [cordon] around the crowd.

Poster to soc.motss, 9/15/00: I dislike David Fenton. He upbraids my sensabilities [sic] about the world, about human interaction. [In e-mail the poster maintains that *upbraids* [not *offends*] *my sensibilities* was the expression he wanted and that it "is one I've heard many times before, if I'm not mistaken."]

Anthony Quinn, review of *True North*, NYT *Book Review*, 5/23/04, p. 18: For example, he [Jim Harrison, author of *True North*] seems to think "enervated" means "unnerved," as in "she was enervated by the feral cat." These solecisms...

3.4. Difficulty in classifying particular examples. Difference between first instances of some element (resulting from reanalysis, regularization, blending, simplification, clarificatory expansion, extension, creative or playful innovation, etc.) and its spread. You can usually be pretty sure **that** something happened, but it's much harder to figure out **why** it happened.

3.5. Need to recognize that the same material can be the result of very different systems:, as for *nucular*:
        a. Inadvertent occasional reshaping of the pronunciation to fit common *–ular* pattern (*tabular, globular, tubular, vernacular, oracular, **molecular**, popular, spectacular, particular, ocular,...*) – a typo.

      b. The *–ular* pronunciation as a (thinko) variant to the *–ear* pronunciation (cf. *radiator*, *apricot*, *tomato*, *envelope*, many many others), distributed in one of several ways, e.g.:

         b1. Free variation, for a speaker.

         b2. Variation according to formality (*nuclear* as the formal, fancy, or scientific pronunciation, *nucular* as the informal, homey, everyday pronunciation), for a speaker.

         b3. Variation according to semantics (*nucular* for nukes, *nuclear* in *nuclear family* and other non-nuke senses), for a speaker – recognized by Nunberg.

         b4. The *–ular* pronunciation as **the** pronunciation for the word, for a speaker (though others have a different pronunciation). Do some people even spell it *nucular*?

         Further query: Is there a *nuculus* as well?

3.5. Just how much of a thinko is *nucular* (in any of these systems)? That depends on how "wrong" (from a social point of view) it is.

3.6. References

Fay, David & Anne Cutler. 1977. Malapropisms and the structure of the mental lexicon. LingI 8.3.505-20.

Nunberg, Geoffrey D. 2004. Going nucular: Language, politics, and culture in controversial times. PublicAffairs.

Zwicky, Arnold M. 1979. Classical malapropisms. Language Sciences 1.2.339-48.

- 1980. Mistakes. Reynoldsburg OH: Advocate Publishing.

- 1982. Classical malapropisms and the creation of a mental lexicon. Exceptional Language and Linguistics, ed. by Loraine Obler and Lise Menn (Academic Press), 115-32.

4. Sources of new material (pronunciations, words, meanings, word forms, syntactic constructions,...), characterized in a loaded way:

      a. Ignorance: reanalysis, regularization, extension (GoToGo).

      b. Laziness: simplification, abbreviation (Subject Omission), blending/telescoping (GoToGo)

      c. Extravagance, laying it on thick: redundant expression (Multiple Negation)

      d. Showing off: playful (*kleenices*) and creative (metaphorical *loaf* 'head', metonymic *skull* 'head, brain') formations

4.1. Subject Omission: *Saw Simon yesterday. Looks great.* (cf. Spanish, Chinese,...)

      Not just sentence-initial: *Yesterday finished the last chapter. This morning sent the whole thing off to the printer.*

      Not just leaving out stuff that can be supplied from context: restriction to main clauses: **I was afraid* (*that*) *kill myself with that contraption.* (cf. *Nearly killed myself with that contraption.*)

      Restricted to special contexts; otherwise, finite clauses in English must have a subject.

      The syntax of casual speech and informal writing is not just a matter of sloppiness, but is highly systematic.

4.2. GoToGo: *She's going to San Francisco and talk on firewalls.* 'She's going to go to San Francisco and talk on firewalls.' (acceptable to ca. 20% of speakers in Laura Staum survey)

> *be going*_{prospective} *to go*_{motional} Goal *and* VP   >
>   PresPart   Base   Base
> *be going*_{prospective/motional} Goal *and* VP
>   PresPart   Base

Then later extensions (for some speakers) to verbs of motion other than *go* (*come*, *run*) and to examples without a Goal adverbial.

4.3. Multiple Negation: *I didn't never see nobody.* vs. standard *I didn't ever see anybody.* (cf. Old English, Russian,...)

Emphatic semantics. The (redundant) multiple negation reinforces the negative character of the clause. Hence, sometimes called Negative Concord or Negation Spreading etc.

The *n*-words (*not, never, nobody, nothing,...*) are true negatives. The words *ever, anybody, anything,...* are usually called "negative polarity items", though in fact they occur more widely than with negation; occurrence in various "irrealis" contexts:
      Negation: *Nobody saw anything.*
      Yes-No Question: *Did anybody see anything?*
      Conditional: *If anybody saw anything, they're not telling.*

Nonstandard Multiple Negation is restricted to true negative contexts:
      Negation: *Nobody saw nothing.*
      Yes-No Question: **Did nobody see nothing?*
      Conditional: **If nobody saw nothing, they're not telling.*
(Nonstandard speakers have *anybody* etc. in Yes-No Questions and Conditionals, just like (more) standard speakers.)

Vernacular speech has several true negative – not merely negative polarity – items, even for speakers who don't have Multiple Negation: *diddly*(-*squat*), *shit*, etc.:
      Negation: *You don't know diddly/diddly-squat/shit about linguistics.*
      Yes-No Question: **Do you know diddly/diddly-squat/shit about*
          linguistics?
      Conditional: **If you know diddly/diddly-squat/shit about linguistics, you'll*
          see the flaw in this reasoning.

The nonstandard system is, first of all, just that – a system, not some random sprinkling of negative words in sentences by careless and inattentive speakers – and, second, a system only minimally different from the standard scheme for distributing negative words.