

Improving Linguistic Resources : Metalinguistic Moves

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Sally McConnell-Ginet, Cornell professor emerita of linguistics, draws on formal semantics, pragmatics, and philosophy of language to study language in social life, initially emphasizing issues of gender and sexuality but expanding to broader issues of linguistic politics. This talk is based on material in *Words Matter : Meaning and Power*, her book in progress for Cambridge University Press.

Linguists rightly proclaim the essential equality of all languages. We often criticize educated élites untrained in linguistics for their disparagement of such linguistic varieties as African American English or so-called Spanglish in the US or Haitian Creole in and beyond Haiti. In Paris, perhaps, linguists might discourage negative commentary on southern French or on what some call 'accent de banlieue'. Given that essential overall equality of languages, how could there be "improvements" in linguistic resources ? Some things are easier to say (or to avoid saying) in one variety than another, and of course vocabularies are often lacking. What we know is that all varieties can indeed change although some changes are more likely and easier than others, and which ones constitute improvements is often disputed.

Linguists studying linguistic change also rightly observe that most change happens below the level of language users' awareness. Only relatively recently has there been study of people's ideas about language and their overt attempts to change linguistic systems and practices. Deborah Cameron has dubbed such attempts verbal hygiene. My emphasis will be on linguistic reform efforts arising in the context of social reform efforts like those engaged in by various feminist, queer, and antiracist groups.

Speech act theorists have traditionally had little to say about metalinguistic speech acts of any kind. Feminist philosophers like Sally Haslanger, however, have begun talking about ameliorative metalinguistic projects. There is now attention more widely in the philosophy of language to what's being called conceptual ethics or conceptual engineering. I want to focus on two related questions about such efforts : what sort of speech act(s) might be involved in proposing and promoting changes in meanings ? and when are disputes over such proposals more than 'merely terminological', i.e., more than 'just semantic' ?