



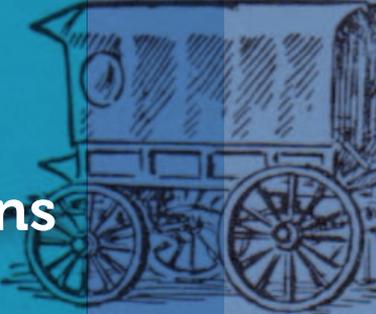
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Matter out of place': Public Perceptions
of and Reactions to Language Use¹

CANNEAN DAN VAN

» KATE BURRIDGE

A panel on 'Accessing Culture Through New and Emerging Media', at the Academy's 2010 Symposium, provided me with the opportunity to tell something of my experience of communicating about language to the broader community via television and radio. As a historical linguist at home with such things as word order change, Latin rhoticism and the Great English Vowel Shift, early in my career I hadn't had much involvement with the cultural institution that is our standard language. Certainly, I had no idea of the concern people had for the well-being of this institution and was little prepared for the passionate public discourse on language and value that accompanied this concern. Like others in my discipline, my training had always been to view language as a natural (even if social) phenomenon, something that evolves and adapts, and can be studied objectively. But this is not how most in the wider community view their language. For them, it is more like an art form, something to be cherished, revered – and preserved. Rather like the 'proper garden' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, language 'should be well fenced from the outside world. It should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature' (William Morris' description of the ideal garden).² As human constructions, gardens and standard languages share two fundamental characteristics.

They are restricted by boundaries and cultivated – but they are not finished pieces of work.

Let me briefly outline the nature of this community engagement. Together with many years of giving public lectures (for schools, festivals, charities and a range of different groups and societies), I've had around 18 years involvement with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), preparing and presenting weekly programmes on language for radio and, more recently, for television. During this time, I have been lucky enough to be involved in a number of talkback radio programs (where callers put directly on air their observations on language and queries about usage). I've also been given the opportunity to write regular pieces for ABC radio's *Soundbank* and since 2007 to present a weekly language spot on the ABCTV show 'Can We Help',³ where I attempt to answer viewers' questions about language. Many have to do with etymology, but like those of the talkback callers, they are also often complaints about the language of others, i.e. observations on what is viewed as bad grammar, sloppy pronunciations, new-fangled words, vulgar colloquialisms, unwanted jargon and, of course, foreign items. As is so often the case when aspects of human behaviour are proscribed, it is what other people do that ends up on the blacklist – 'knowledge about language' might have

dropped from the school curriculum, but we are all born with a keen nose for the ill-chosen word and the grammatical error of our fellow speakers!

Typically, these complaints target words and word usage that are believed to threaten the identity of the culture – what eighteenth-century grammarians referred to as the ‘genius’ of the language.⁴ Authenticity has two faces here: one is the struggle to arrest linguistic change and to retain the language in its perceived traditional form; the other is to rid the language of unwanted elements and to protect it from foreign influences. However, as linguist Deborah Cameron has argued,

of others and looking things up in dictionaries and usage guides. These activities are born of a fascination with language, but also the urge to improve it and clean it up. And like other tabooing practices, they also help to define the gang.

Community engagement in this area has many challenges. One is the complication of having to talk about something such as the Latin rhoticism and the Great English Vowel Shift (as examples of topics I’ve had to cover recently) to those who probably know more about the ins and outs of climate change and stem cell research than they do about nouns and verbs – and who probably aren’t at

VERBAL HYGIENISTS ALSO ENJOY THINKING AND ARGUING ABOUT WORDS, CORRECTING THE WRITING OF OTHERS AND LOOKING THINGS UP IN DICTIONARIES AND USAGE GUIDES

the prescriptive endeavours of people are more complex and diverse than this.⁵ She prefers the expression ‘verbal hygiene’ over ‘prescription’ or ‘purism’ for exactly this reason. Verbal hygienists are the people found in those language associations formed to promote causes as diverse as Plain English, spelling reform, Esperanto, effective communication, and even things as esoteric as the preservation of Old English strong verbs, the abolition of the aberrant apostrophe and the advancement of Klingon. There are in fact hundreds of people out there inventing languages – *conlangers* they’re called, or ‘constructed language creators’. Verbal hygienists also enjoy thinking and arguing about words, correcting the writing

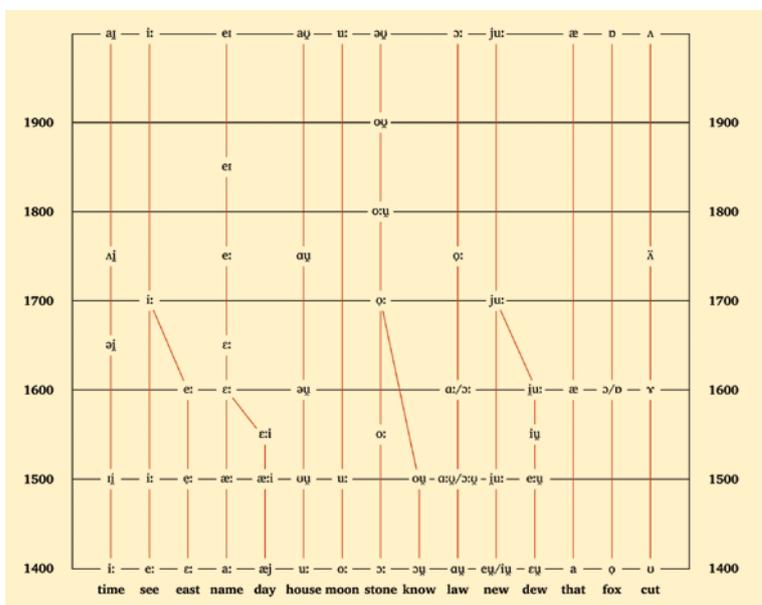
all interested in sounds except to complain about the consonants and vowels of others. Then there’s the challenge of providing a potted account of the Latin rhoticism and the Great English Vowel Shift, often in less than a minute (no room for long-windedness) and the additional difficulty of having to convince broadcasters and producers that language is more than words and their meanings – and that, yes, even the subjunctive can make for riveting radio and television!

Three incidents in particular convinced me that this kind of engagement is important and needs to be done. Two that occurred very early in my academic career especially stick in my mind. The first involved one of Robyn Williams’ excellent programmes on ABC Radio National – the show caught my attention on this occasion because it featured an academic from Monash University who was presenting a piece on infixes in English. This was remarkable in itself, since infixes belong to a rare group of affixes that stuff inside a word rather than attach to the beginning or the end like the more familiar prefixes and suffixes. Moreover, they don’t exist in English, except in colloquial curiosities like *absobloodylutely* (featuring the so-called ‘bloody-insertion rule’). Needless to say, there wasn’t a single example of an actual infix in the entire programme (with the exception of one provided by Robyn Williams when he concluded the show with ‘Fanbloodytastic!’). The second irritation was that the academic presenting the piece on English infixes was a physicist whose hobby was language. Presumably even a serious love of quantum mechanics or thermodynamics

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A graph showing the Great English Vowel Shift.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.





LEFT
 Graffiti found on the back of a business in Austin, Texas. Author: Senorelrobo. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

would never be enough to secure a gig on the Science Show. So the message was clear. If professional linguists don't do this sort of work, others will – and they may well get it wrong.

The second incident occurred not long after when the Melbourne *Age* republished an article that vividly conveyed negative views, shared by many it seemed, towards my discipline. In this piece, Laurence Urdang, editor of *Verbatim*, described linguists as 'categorically the dullest

transfer' (or the initialism 'KT'), this mission never factors into any university KPIs (or Key Performance Indicators). But it is rewarding work, and I've benefitted hugely from it – the flow of ideas between university and the community is indeed a two-way one. People's concerns regularly alert me to something interesting happening in the language – a new discourse particle, a meaning shift, a grammatical change perhaps. As I've said on other occasions, the clues to where

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people on the face of the earth; [...] rather than trying to present and explain information, they seem to be going in the opposite direction. They try to shield people from knowing anything useful about the language'.⁶ Clearly, linguistics had a something of an image problem. And so I became determined to show that 'the pointy-headed abstruse strudel of academic linguistics', to quote Urdang, does indeed have something to offer.

Despite current buzzwords such as 'community engagement', 'community service', 'knowledge

a language like English is heading often lurk in the linguistic constructions that many regard as wrong, bad or sloppy. Linguistic bugbears provide me with a constant source of ideas for exploring linguistic change. Think of *between you and I*, *mischievous*, *gotten*, *youse*, *yeah-no*, *to verse*, *funnest*, and *penultimate* (which some younger speakers now use to refer to something that is 'out-of-this-world greatest'). I've learned much and have derived a huge amount of pleasure following up people's queries and complaints (though this

does not include the hours spent trying to find rhymes for *orange* or words ending in *-gry!*).

But it's more than just a matter of feeding my research interests. Public discourse on language and value is certainly ferociously passionate and confident, but it's also lacking in the norms we expect of debate on other topics. Ever since schools moved away from the explicit teaching of linguistic awareness, many people haven't had much of a clue about how their language works. Nonetheless,



ABOVE

Meadow Lane
Errant Apostrophes.
Attribution: John
Sutton, 2011.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA
COMMONS.

they still have views, and strong ones. People are self-styled experts in English simply because they speak it, and every native English speaker feels free to voice an authoritative opinion. Linguistic intolerance is rampant – as Deborah Cameron notes: ‘Linguistic bigotry is among the last publicly expressible prejudices left.’⁷ People frequently make extremely negative value judgements about others who use vocabulary, grammar and accent that they view as *bad English*, often castigating

status accents remains rife and goes unchallenged.

People generally see a clear common sense distinction between what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ in language and no amount of well-argued rational linguistic evidence seems able to sway them from what they see as self-evident.⁸ In 2002 Margaret Florey and I published some research on the discourse particle *yeah-no* in Australian English.⁹ In a follow-up opinion piece in Melbourne’s *Age*, writer and former English teacher David Campbell outlined the various functions that we had identified for this new discourse particle; he then went onto dismiss these on the grounds that *yeah-no* is ‘yet another example of speech-junk – unnecessary words that clutter up our language’. Let me emphasise with fan-fare and with trumpet blast – discourse particles might get up your nose or under your skin, but they are never ‘speech-junk’. Expressions such as *yeah-no*, *I mean*, *I think*, *well*, *you know* and *like* have mindbogglingly complicated semantics and play crucial roles in conversational interaction and politeness, facts that David Campbell acknowledged but rejected outright simply because deep down he ‘knew’ *yeah-no* was a piece of junk.¹⁰

Frank of Floreat Park was an ABC talkback caller who regularly used to hang up the phone in disgust (if he wasn’t first disconnected). In Frank’s eyes, linguists are a laid-back bunch of people, who flatly refuse to address people’s concerns about language. We are part of a permissive ethos encouraging the alleged decline and continued abuse of Standard English – anything goes! Of course, the linguistic position is anything but ‘anything goes’. What linguists try to promote is a responsive attitude to language. Expressions like *yeah-no* don’t belong in written or even in

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SPEAKERS OF NON-STANDARD DIALECTS AND LOW-STATUS ACCENTS REMAINS RIFE AND GOES UNCHALLENGED

such people as ‘uneducated’, even ‘stupid’. It is very much out of whack in an era otherwise so obsessed with equality for all and the desire not to offend. The basic human right of respect is understood to mean that people can no longer speak of or to others in terms that are considered insulting and demeaning; yet, this behaviour does not extend to the way people talk about the language skills of others. Conscious and unconscious discrimination against speakers of non-standard dialects and low-

formal spoken language, but where they do belong is in our informal chat – they are among the important verbal cuddling strategies of English.

Fiery exchanges are commonplace when it comes to issues of language use. Indeed, because of the extreme views expressed by someone who emailed me, (most notably his suggestion that I might be better off dead), I was advised to contact the local police. When I explained to the police officer the concern that triggered these emails

(in this instance, the etymology of the phrase *Gordon Bennett*), he exclaimed: ‘What would it be like if you spoke about something that really mattered!’ But of course language does matter, and it clearly matters a lot to many people.

These days it’s punctuation that prompts particularly fiery public outbursts. The 2003 ‘Runaway number British Bestseller’, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, is certainly evidence of this. This amusing punctuation guide has received

LET ME EMPHASISE WITH FAN-FARE AND WITH TRUMPET BLAST –
DISCOURSE PARTICLES MIGHT GET UP YOUR NOSE OR UNDER YOUR SKIN,
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prayers of thanks from verbal hygienists the world over – who could imagine that a book on apostrophes, commas, colons and exclamation marks could sell over three million hardcopies even before its debut in paperback? I also recall the time I recommended that English might be better off if it abandoned the hyphen in certain contexts and retained it only for other more useful functions. This sparked fierce attack (as did my suggestion that English could well survive without the services of the possessive apostrophe). The following is but one of the many emails received.

Email (concerning the hyphen) from ‘The Weatherman’, 22 June 2005

Subject: Grammar

Just read an article regarding your strange ideas that you have just published in the weed book or something.

I’m 25, tattooed ex con, so not in the habit of sending emails like this (or ever actually).

Although there is one thing that REALLY annoys me. People that want to take away from the English language.

If you want to become more American in your use (or non-use) as the case maybe, then so be it. *Did you note the hyphen ;-)*

But language makes us what we are, i’s [sic] our common ground.

Already there are far too many illiterate people in the world.

You seem to want to make a dumb world even dumber. Good one.

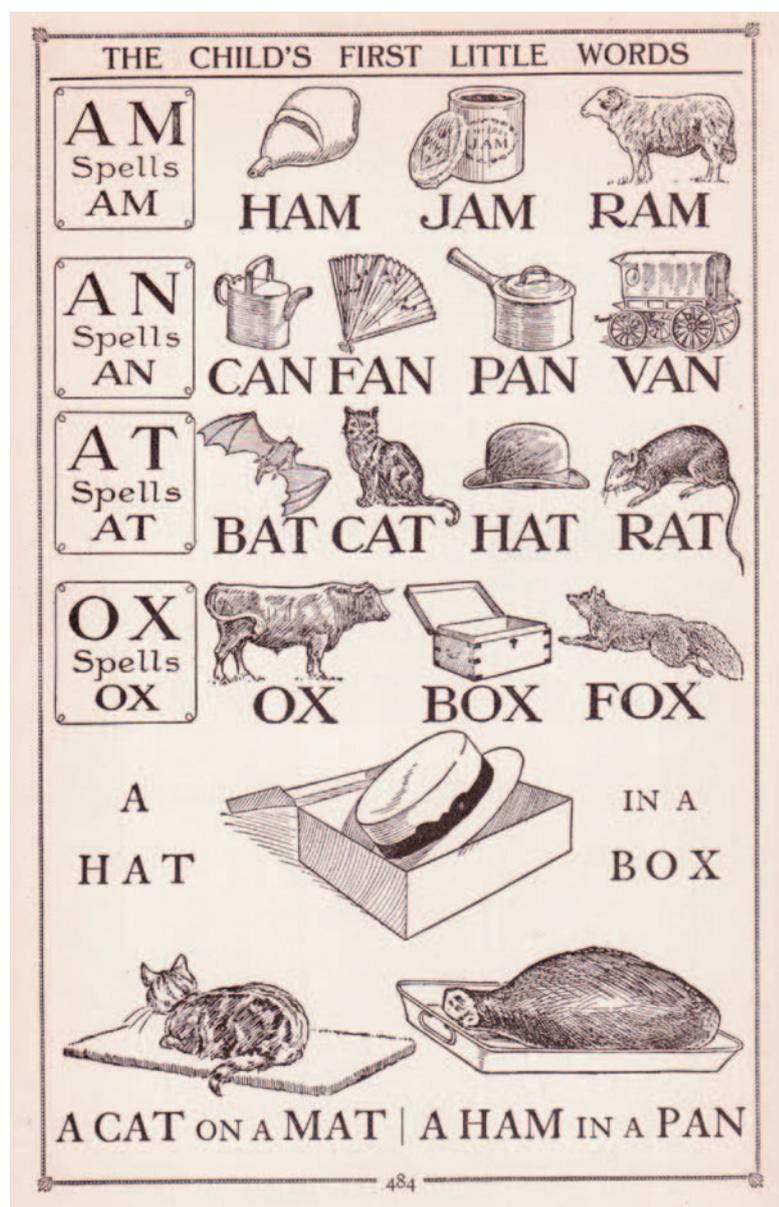
It is interesting that someone who describes himself as a 25 year-old tattooed ex-con should vent spleen about a piece of punctuation. Clearly, it is not simply the listeners and viewers of Australia’s national public broadcaster who feel strongly about their language, and the correspondence and general feedback I receive bears this out.

The complaint tradition is alive and well, but there is a striking difference. During the eighteenth century, the golden era of prescription, matters of punctuation fell under the purist radar – a

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Page 484 of “The Book of Knowledge”, “The Children’s Encyclopedia”, edited by Arthur Mee and Holland Thompson, Ph. D., Vol II, 1912, The Grolier Society of New York. Author: Sue Clark.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



couple of hundred years ago, no one batted an eyelid over a misplaced hyphen or an aberrant apostrophe. English historical linguist Joan Beal has tried to explain the extent of current public interest in punctuation, most notably what has been dubbed 'the greengrocer's apostrophe'.¹¹ When a Melbourne store prominently displays a sign advertising the sale of *Canva's Hat's*, it is tempting to think that the apostrophe has entered a new decorative phase (much like details of timber beams on ancient Greek buildings that are later repeated in stone buildings, though they no longer

she?'. There is a sense in which this caller was absolutely correct – I don't think I really did get it. I realise now, it was never about linguistic facts, but how people perceive their language to be.

There is clearly a sense in which standard languages pass into supernatural realms. They become an ideal that speakers have for their language and everyday usage never quite rises to the occasion – not even the performances of 'good' speakers and writers. Editors, dictionary makers and handbook writers, who help to establish and maintain this object of worship, become the ones

WHO COULD IMAGINE THAT A BOOK ON APOSTROPHES, COMMAS, COLONS AND EXCLAMATION MARKS COULD SELL OVER THREE MILLION HARDCOPIES EVEN BEFORE ITS DEBUT IN PAPERBACK?

serve a utilitarian function; compare buttons on the cuffs of jackets, running boards on early cars, pendulums on modern longcase clocks). Apostrophation is a matter of proof-reading and not a matter of life and death; yet, as Beal notes, 'it is clear that many intelligent people do see the "greengrocer's apostrophe" as just that'. She concludes: 'Perhaps the apostrophe and its alleged misuse have come to stand for a whole set of values which the "grumpy" generation fear losing'. It might also be because people know something about the rules of the apostrophe, whereas rules to do with the subjunctive or infinitive clause formation no longer loom large in their lives.

But let me now move to the third incident that has shaped my thinking as regards linguists and the wider community. In 2001 the new *Herald*

with the specialised knowledge. They possess the shamanic powers to control the events, to diagnose and to cure. Some even create certain rituals of prohibition and avoidance themselves. It is after all the activities of these language professionals that advertise violations of codes and draw people's attention to ill-chosen words, grammatical errors and infelicities of style. Once condemned by those in authority, these features find themselves no longer a part of what is good and what is proper – as Dwight Bolinger once put it, 'a bit after the fashion of a fireman who makes himself necessary by setting a fire!'¹²

However, there are signs of change. Growing egalitarianism and social democracy are now seeing the solidarity function of accents gaining over the status function. The

COLLOQUIALISATION, LIBERALISATION AND THE EFFECTS OF E-COMMUNICATION ARE GIVING THE VERNACULAR A NEW CACHET AND RESPECTABILITY WITHIN SOCIETY

Style Guide for Australian journalists appeared on the scene. In a discussion on radio with the writer, Kim Lockwood, I suggested that the rules he outlined weren't cut-and-dried and that he should have guided his readers through the range of available options. Other rules, I argued, were no longer valid and should be dispensed with. One talkback caller phoned up, totally frustrated, and said: 'She just doesn't get it, does

relationship between standard and nonstandard usage is clearly transforming with changes in educational practices heralding the end of years of institutionalised prescription. Colloquialisation, liberalisation and the effects of e-communication are giving the vernacular a new cachet and respectability within society.¹³ So will this spell the end of linguistic purism?

Dictionaries and handbooks give acts of

linguistic purification a more public arena. However, there's ample evidence of linguistic purism throughout the history of English, even before people started to lay down the laws on standards. A good example is the hostile response provoked by the influx of 'inkhorn terms' during the Renaissance. Purists went as far as attempting to revive obsolete native words such as *raintilt* to replace *umbrella* (some even created new ones like *mateword* for *synonym*). These activities occurred well before the creation of any English language dictionaries as we know them.¹⁴ Field linguists also report that speakers of non-standardised, non-written languages also express prescriptive sentiments, and when these languages are endangered, purism can be the kiss of death.¹⁵

But what about younger English speakers today – those who have grown up with variation and change as facts of linguistic life? A recent survey of our first year linguistics students revealed that these young speakers overwhelmingly showed intolerance towards language change, especially when it came to American English influence (a hot talkback topic). Of the 71 students surveyed, 81% expressed the view that the incorporation of American elements into Australian English was detrimental to the language.¹⁶ These students have gone through the 'language in use' approach at school. They have also had one year of linguistics and been immersed in the accepted wisdom of



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Dr. Samuel Johnson reading *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

SOURCE: THE ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE OF ART VOL. 1, NO. 1 (CA. 1853). AUTHOR UNKNOWN. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

the discipline. Yet I see no evidence of any new open-mindedness in their linguistic thinking. David Crystal has predicted a new egalitarian linguistic era where 'eternal tolerance' will replace the old 'eternal vigilance' of institutionalised prescription.¹⁷ Perhaps it is simply, as he says, that new attitudes and practices take time.

However, I do not believe that purism is simply the by-product of codification and generations of prescriptive thinking. As long as we signal our identity via linguistic means, we will continue to judge others by how they speak. I imagine that for as long as human language has existed, people have complained about the language of their fellow speakers. An integral part of the linguistic behaviour of every human group is the desire to constrain and manage language and to purge it

of unwanted elements. Next to the shamans are the self-appointed arbiters of linguistic goodness, ordinary language users who follow the ritual and taboo those words and constructions they see as 'unorderly' and outside the boundaries of the standard language. Feelings about what is 'clean' and what is 'dirty' in language are universal and humankind would have to change beyond all recognition before these urges to control and clean up the language disappeared. The definition of 'dirt' might change over the years, but the desire to clean up remains the same.

Mary Douglas' theory of pollution and taboo offers interesting insights here. As she sees it, the distinction between cleanliness and filth stems from the basic human need for categorisation – our need to structure the chaotic environment

around us and render it understandable. That which is dirty is that which does not fit in with our 'cherished classifications'; dirt is 'matter out of place'. The standardisation process forces languages into tidy classificatory systems. The neat lists and elegant paradigms inside the dictionary and handbook provide the perfect counterpart to the 'boundless chaos of a living speech' (my favourite quotation from Samuel Johnson) that lies outside. There are no grey areas any more, but clear boundaries as to what is and what is not acceptable. The language is defined by condemnation and proscription of those words and constructions deemed impure or not belonging. The infiltration of linguistic innovations, lexical exotics, and non-standard features is a transgression of the defining boundaries and poses a threat to the language – as well as to the society of which the language is a manifestation and a symbol. So they are tabooed and brushed aside. And, as Mary Douglas concludes her ideas on pollution: "The moral of all this is that the facts of existence are a chaotic jumble".¹⁸ Then so, too, is the language we use to describe these facts. Like gardens, standard languages are never finished products. To create such a work of art is to enter into a partnership with natural processes; prescription would soon render the work sterile and useless.



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communities in North America, the notion of linguistic taboo and the structure and history of English. Recent books include *Introducing English Grammar* (with Kersti Börjars, 2010) and *Gift of the Gob: Morsels of English language history* (2010).

- 1 A variant version of this paper has appeared as 'Linguistic Cleanliness is Next to Godliness: Taboo and Purism' in *English Today: The International Review of the English Language*, 26, 2 (2010), 3-13.
- 2 William Morris, 'Making the best of it', in *The Hopes and Fears for Art* (A Paper read before the Trades' Guild of Learning and the Birmingham Society of Artists), 1882.
- 3 See <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/canwehelp/>>
- 4 The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1775) identifies the genius of a language as 'the

- particular set of ideas which the words [...] either from their formation or multiplicity, are apt to excite in the mind of anyone who hears it properly uttered'. Quoted in Sterling A. Leonard, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800* (New York: Russell and Russell, [1929] 1962), p. 29.
- 5 Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 6 The piece originally appeared in *The Washington Post*, 13 January 1992, p. D5 and was then reprinted in *The Age*.
- 7 Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, p. 13.
- 8 Just as I was finishing this essay, a letter appeared in the *Green Guide* of Melbourne's *Age* newspaper (26 January 2012, p. 4) in which Arthur Comer railed against the 'careless approach' of 'those, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, who would legitimise any common mispronunciation of kilometre'. And the result of this 'careless approach' – 'unscientific chaos'.
- 9 Kate Burridge and Margaret Florey. "'Yeah-no he's a good kid": A Discourse Analysis of yeah-no in Australian English', *The Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 22 (2002), 149-72.
- 10 David Campbell, 'Too much speech-junk? Yeah-no!', *Age* 19 June 2004, p. 8.
- 11 Joan Beal, 'The Grocer's Apostrophe: Popular Prescriptivism in the 21st Century', *English Today: The International Review of the English Language*, 26, 2 (2010), p. 63. See also Tiekens-Boon van Ostade, 'The Usage Guide: Its Birth and Popularity', *English Today: The International Review of the English Language*, 26, 2 (2010), 14-24.
- 12 Dwight Bolinger, *Language: The Loaded Weapon* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 7.
- 13 Cf. David Crystal, 'Into the Twenty-first century', in *The Oxford History of English*, ed. by Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 394-413.
- 14 Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade, pers. com.
- 15 Cf. Nancy Dorian, 'Purism vs. Compromise in Language Revitalization and Language Revival', *Language in Society*, 23 (1994), 479-94.
- 16 Here are some of the explanations offered: 'Because Australian English would then slowly perish and it won't be unique anymore'; 'Loss of Australian identity'; 'Often US English seems to use "wrong" words, I don't like the use of "z" instead of "s" and cannot stand "for free"; 'Why would we want to speak American English? I think "they" are lazy with language'; 'American accents are so nasal and it sounds yuck. American rap terms ≠ cool'; 'Even though it's not sociolinguistically correct to say this, but I think that American English is "bad" English and we should try and stay away from it as much as possible'; cf. Naomi Ferguson, *The Americanisation of Australian English: Attitudes, Perception and Usage*, (Monash University Honours Thesis, 2008).
- 17 Crystal, 'Into the Twenty-first Century', pp. 410-11.
- 18 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 193.