word unanalyzed: belfry, from an earlier berfry, analyzes the first element as related to bell, but leaves the -fry element meaningless. The line between an instance of folk etymology and a malapropism is sometimes a thin one, but in principle a malapropism confuses two similar-sounding words (e.g., in an example from Sheridan's character Mrs. Malaprop, contiguous and contagious) while folk etymology is an error based on the supposed meaning of elements within the word (even if those elements are clearly absurd, like the mouse in titmouse) which spreads beyond the individual to a whole community. Both are often occasioned by the attempt to use exotic or difficult vocabulary whose form is not entirely accurately perceived.

See also: Etymology.

Bibliography


Folk Linguistics

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In the world outside linguistics, people who are not professional students of language nevertheless talk about it. Such overt knowledge of and comment about language by nonlinguists is the subject matter of folk linguistics. Although study of folk linguistics is older, interest was reawakened at the 1964 University of California, Los Angeles, Sociolinguistics Conference:

We should be interested not only in (a) what goes on (language), but also in (b) how people react to what goes on (they are persuaded, they are put off, etc.) and in (c) what people say goes on (talk concerning language). It will not do to dismiss these secondary and tertiary modes of conduct merely as sources of error. (Hoenigswald, 1966: 20)

Hoenigswald's plan for the study of folk linguistics (c above) included collections of folk expressions for speech acts and even of folk terminology for and definitions of such grammatical categories as 'word' and 'sentence.' He proposed uncovering folk accounts of homonymy and synonymy, regionalism and language variety, and social structure (e.g., age and sex). He suggested that particular attention be paid to folk accounts of the correcting of linguistic behavior, especially in the context of first language acquisition and in relation to ideas of correctness and acceptability. He recommended asking what sorts of language and speech styles are admired and what sorts have special status as taboo. He urged researchers to seek folk linguistic accounts of both language history and deficit (e.g., stuttering and muteness).

Here 'folk' refers to those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation. It does not refer to rustic, ignorant, uneducated, backward, so-called primitive, minority, isolated, marginalized, or lower-status groups or individuals. Included in the research on folk linguistic belief in the United States speech community most often cited in this entry, for example, are respondents who know the names of Noam Chomsky, Dell Hymes, and William Labov. To do otherwise would be to assume that folklore and cultural anthropology are not doable in some societies. Another important importation from modern folklore into folk linguistic research is the notion that folk belief is simply belief, its folk character being no indication of its truth or falsity.

Hoenigswald's suggestions have been taken up recently, and the discrediting of folk belief has been rejected, but even those who would agree that folk belief is worthy of investigation have raised objections—one that suggests that folk linguistics is impoverished, particularly in the English-speaking world, and another that suggests it is largely inaccessible.

The impoverishment issue was raised by William Labov, immediately following Hoenigswald's 1964 presentation:

The overt responses in American and English society generally are quite poor as far as vocabulary is concerned. 'Poverty-stricken' would be the best term for this vocabulary. The inadequacy of people's overt remarks about their own language is directly reflected in the fact that there are only a few words that they use to convey the subjective response that they feel.... But some of the references made here today show that there are highly institutionalized folk attitudes toward language which are much richer than those which we
are accustomed to meeting in the U.S. and England. (discussion by Labov in Hoenigswald, 1966: 23)

If one could show a strong pattern of "subjective response" that the folk were interested in talking about but were incapable of talking about due to vocabulary deficiency, then one might say that a language (or variety) was inadequate, but Labov himself singles out linguistic features for which the folk have such labels and makes the point that they are linguistic stereotypes, items that are the subject matter of overt comment (e.g., Labov, 1972: 248). When the folk are vague, confused, or simply wrong about linguistic phenomena, it is often in their responses to linguists, which may prove only that linguists either ask about objects of no interest to the folk or fail to account for the adequacy of the folk notion.

One appropriate treatment of folk responses tries to set them in a dynamic context of use, not in a static one of folk knowledge. This allows one to find a detailed folk linguistics, one operating at many levels of linguistic structure and in many areas of concern. Joel Sherzer reflects this attitude in his comment on folk names for ways of speaking:

Terms for talk ... are communicative resources which vary from person to person and from context to context and are used strategically in the course of speaking. In addition, there are significant features of ... language and speech that are not labeled, and there are labels that are ambiguous without reference to contextualization in concrete instances of usage. (Sherzer, 1983: 16)

The second impediment to folk linguistic research is the inaccessibility to folk consciousness of linguistically interesting matters. Michael Silverstein (1981) attempts to describe the sorts of language features that are available to folk awareness and suggests five conditions: (a) unavoidable referentiality, (b) continuous segmentability, (c) relative presuppositionality, (d) decontextualized deducibility, and (e) metapragmatic transparency.

Silverstein illustrates 'unavoidable referentiality' with the deference-to-hearer versus solidarity-with-hearer pragmatic system, realized as a second or third person plural (deferential) versus a second person singular (solidary) - e.g., German (German, Standard) Sie versus du; French vous versus tu. The opposition is unavoidably referential, for the pronoun forms that carry the pragmatic system are the same ones that refer to individuals (Silverstein, 1981: 5). In contrast, although a speaker's selection of a certain phonetic variant in a given performance might symbolize greater deference to a hearer (as a result of the greater formality associated with that variant), such variants are not themselves referential; therefore, although formality versus informality is a pragmatic opposition, its realization in the use of a particular phonetic variant is not unavoidably referential and less open to folk awareness.

The second of Silverstein's requirements is 'continuous segmentability.' Some linguistic units are not interrupted by other material. In I am going to town, the entire sentence, each word, phrases such as to town, and even morphemes such as -ing are all continuously segmentable. The form that refers to the progressive aspect, however, is am -ing and displays discontinuity, making it less open to awareness (Silverstein, 1981: 6). However, in a lengthy discussion of the passive, an equally discontinuous phenomenon, several U.S. English-speaking respondents provided evidence for considerable awareness of the construction (Niedzielski and Preston, 2003). Subject-verb agreement, multiple negation, and so-called split infinitives, all discontinuous or potentially so, are also frequently discussed phenomena in English, suggesting that some other factors may overcome Silverstein's purely linguistic categorizations.

'Relative presuppositionality' is Silverstein's term for the degree to which a pragmatic function depends on contextual factors to realize its meaning. At one end of this scale are such items as this and that, which successfully function only if there is a physical reality to which they can be linked, a relative physical (or mental) distance that supports the choice between them, or a prior mention of some entity (Silverstein, 1981: 7). Such presuppositionally dependent items do very little creative work and, according to Silverstein, are readily available to the folk as linguistic objects. At the other end of the scale are items that are context creating. For example, Duranti (1984) notes that third person subject pronoun occurrence in Italian (a pro-drop language) signals a "main character" and usually one toward whom the speaker displays "positive affect." This function of such pronoun appearance in Italian is hidden to folk speakers.

Silverstein's 'decontextualized deducibility' says more about how linguistic facts are accounted for by the folk than about their general availability. Silverstein claims that one common path taken by folk commenters on linguistic objects is that of specifying the 'deducible entailed presuppositions,' a characterization that, he says, is the equivalent of stating the meaning. In other words, providing the contexts in which the form in question fits or is true is a common folk activity (Silverstein, 1981: 13–14).

The fit between increasingly specified contexts and a word's appropriate use is explicitly remarked on by D, a folk respondent, in the following: