

Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?

Edwin L. Battistella. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005. Pp. vi + 230.

Many individuals have experienced situations in which the way they spoke or wrote may have been subject to varying degrees of correction, scorn, disdain, or even ridicule. The exploration of what makes language “bad” – that is, deviant in the eyes of some - is Battistella’s main focus in *Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?*, as he engages in a closely reasoned discussion about how some forms of language varieties have come to be characterized as ethnic, provincial, convoluted, or immoral. Battistella calls for a more relative and descriptive way of viewing so-called deviant language. Additionally, the author endeavors to alter language attitudes, calling instead for a culture of engagement with such varieties rather than, as he puts it, a standoff between traditionalism versus nihilism.

The book is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1, “Realism vs. Relativism,” introduces the idea of simultaneously accepting language canons and language distinctions to be appreciated in their proper contexts. Chapter 2, “Bad Writing,” argues for the notion that good writing is actually a relative concept and that writers may select different registers to suit their audience. In chapter 3, “Bad Grammar,” Battistella cohesively outlines the effects of the stigmatization of bad grammar, calling on educated persons to understand the limits of traditional grammar and the social function of standard English. The author supports his argument with examples of late 19th and early 20th century prescriptivist efforts to fight language decay, and the effort of the *English Language Arts* report of 1952 to understand the regularity of nonstandard variants. In chapter 4, “Bad Words,” Battistella acknowledges the existence of slang and curse words as language that may be offensive but that is also reflective of real life, and how such language forms may promote a sense of solidarity among their users. Additionally, according to Battistella, politically correct language, such as the difference between using *disabled* versus *crippled*, is best understood when “we understand the alternatives, the logic, and the consequences of our choices” (p. 99).

The subsequent chapters, “Bad Citizens” and “Bad Accents,” observe in detail the wider macro-level societal issues of those who do not speak the majority language and/or who do not sound like the standard majority. In chapter 5, Battistella is primarily concerned with language assimilation issues such as the need to “fit into” the mainstream, as well as the need to ensure financial well-being in the long run through mainstream language use, ultimately calling for language diversity to be more accepted. He draws on examples of the recent efforts to incorporate bilingual education into American schools, and to what he refers to as the divisive English-only backlash against language diversity occurring in some U.S. states. Similarly, in chapter 6, “Bad Accents,” he asserts that regional dialects and African American Vernacular English are unique systems with their own linguistic rules or, as Labov (2004) stated, highly structured systems which should not be viewed as obstacles to learning. In the final chapter, Battistella lucidly suggests that instead of moving away from simplistic thoughts about good and bad language, language policy should balance tradition and innovation, and should be driven by research and history rather than misconceptions about speakers and metaphors about language.

Battistella’s analysis exposes us to a wide spectrum of cases that elaborate on his desire to approach the conception of so-called bad language forms as varieties in their own right. His description of projects undertaken by sociolinguist Walt Wolfram and linguist Maya Honda, as

well as the activities of the University of Oregon Linguistic Olympics, expand on this notion. However, the book would have benefited from a more detailed and expansive argument in two specific areas. First, his examination of bad words in British and American society does not take into consideration the purported decline of polite language in recent years. Truss (2005), in *Talk to the Hand*, referred to the “plummeting of social standards” (p. 31), and, according to a study she cited, nine percent of those interviewed thought that children behaved politely towards adults. Therefore, by exploring the relation of the tolerance of bad words to general notions of politeness in society, Battistella could have strengthened his discussion even more by stating how these issues should be reconciled in the future. Second, Battistella’s view of a U.S. “in no danger of being overcome by linguistic separatism” (p. 122) is difficult to grasp in view of current national population and immigration trends. Although he cites a sociologist as saying, “surveys of Hispanics find that they overwhelmingly support the idea that speaking and understanding English is necessary for citizenship and economic success” (p. 121), he fails to consider specific cases such as cities with large Spanish-speaking populations. For example, Miami is a metropolis where economic factors enhance the vitality of Spanish (Porcel, 2006) and the “average income of bilingual workers exceeds that of Anglo monolinguals by almost \$7000” (p. 94). The future will very likely yield similar urban scenarios with the *Hispanicization* of an America that will be increasingly bifurcated, bilingual, and bicultural (Huntington, 2004), requiring a more serious look at U.S. language policy altogether. Had Battistella taken these current, noteworthy trends into account more seriously as he argues against English being in danger from Spanish, his point would have been more convincing.

Overall, Battistella’s book provides the reader with a neatly packaged and detailed expose of the current issues surrounding language variation and is a good way for those unfamiliar with the subject to gain a critical overview of the area. It is definitely an engaging read for those interested in sociolinguistics, or those fascinated with language in general.

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