“How many languages do you speak?” Perceptions and misconceptions about linguistics and linguists

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Abstract

Many linguists are familiar with the question: “How many languages do you speak?” Anecdotally, it is well known among our discipline that non-linguists have misconceptions about linguistics and the work of linguists. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a survey to identify popular beliefs about what linguistics is and what linguists do, to examine these beliefs, and to determine the prevalence of these perceptions. Furthermore, this study seeks to find out if exposure to linguistics can educate the general public about the field and dispel the myths and misconceptions.

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1. Introduction

Upon finding out that I am a linguist, people typically ask, “How many languages do you speak?” It appears that many linguists have been met with this same question from non-linguists. As Lidz and Kronrod observe, “the general populace seems to have no idea what linguistics is” (2014:450). Ask a layperson what linguistics is about, and what linguists do, and you will likely elicit a range of wrong notions. Chumbou (1985:9) refers to this kind of common misconception as “innocent ignorance” about linguistics and linguists.

The main objective of this study is to identify non-linguists’ perceptions and misconceptions about what linguistics is, and what linguists do. Using a survey approach, opinions are collected and examined to obtain insight into the general public’s beliefs and attitudes toward linguistics and linguists. Furthermore, this paper discusses whether exposure to linguistics can educate people about the field and dispel the myths and misconceptions.

2. Research questions and hypotheses

In the general linguistics literature there are many references to misconceptions about linguistics and linguists. For the purposes of this paper, “misconception” is defined as a mistaken notion. Probably the most commonly cited misconception is that all linguists are multilingual. This is the folk belief that a professional linguist is invariably a polyglot

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and that a linguist's job is to learn multiple languages. Many linguists report that after revealing their profession to non-linguists they are often confronted with the question, “How many languages do you speak?” (Barry, 2002; Christison, 2010; Crystal, 2009; Hopper, 2007; Hornstein, 2013; Johnson, 2011; Kaye, 2009; Lakoff, 2001; Myers-Scotton, 2006; Nevins, 2010; Preston, 1998; Pullum, 1991; Sanusi, 1996; Sarangi, 2013; Strong-Krause, 2015; Walker, 2015). Justice describes this colloquial meaning of linguistics as, “the study of specific languages with the goal of learning to read, write or speak them,” (2004:1).

Other misconceptions frequently referred to in the literature are the beliefs that linguistics takes a prescriptive approach to language, and that the field is mainly, or solely about grammar, particularly in an everyday sense rather than a technical one (Barry, 2002; Hopper, 2007; Johnson, 2011; Justice, 2004; Preston, 1998). Linguists are portrayed as “grammar Nazis” or “language police” who are always poised to correct “bad grammar” and preach “good grammar” (Preston, 1998). Linguists report people's fears of having their speech scrutinized and judged. These concerns are revealed in remarks such as, “I’d better watch what I say,” (Preston, 1998:255) and, “I guess I’d better watch my grammar then,” (Johnson, 2011:12) or, in anticipation of making grammatical “mistakes”, “I don’t speak correctly, I'm afraid,” and “I was never any good at grammar,” (Hopper, 2007:236). Johnson asserts that these statements “reveal both a lack of understanding of linguistic issues and a deep insecurity about language (2011:12).

Preston observes that there is “a public lack of knowledge about what we do,” (1998:255). In light of the above remarks, it certainly appears that non-linguists have little understanding of linguistics, and what it is that a linguist does. This is unsurprising because most non-linguists have no exposure to linguistics. The subject is not typically taught as part of the K-12 curriculum, but only at a tertiary level (Denham and Lobeck, 2014). In general, linguistic theory is not widely disseminated among the general public. As Spring et al. note, “the discipline is relatively unknown, at best, and often misunderstood and feared,” (2000:111).

Certainly, the general public may be equally unaware of the nature and work of other academic disciplines, and many skilled trades and professions too. However, linguistics specifically involves the study of human language and communication, and therefore, linguists should be proficient at communicating with the very subjects we study. It is an irony that, although experts in the subject of language, linguists are often poor at getting our message across.

What is linguistics? Linguistics is generally defined as the scientific study of language. To provide a more detailed explanation, this paper will adopt the definition of linguistics as, “the study of the human ability to produce and interpret language in speaking, writing and signing” (Allan, 2016:1). A linguist is here defined as, “someone who studies and describes the structure and composition of language and/or languages in a methodical and rigorous manner” (2016:1).

Why does it matter what lay people think about linguistics and linguists? What is at stake? There are many reasons why these naïve attitudes can damage the reputation of our profession. For example, they can hurt the funding climate of the field, negatively affect our ability to educate the public about linguistic theory, and our ability to influence public policies about bilingual education, etc. Wrong notions about linguistics can also make it more difficult to attract new people to the field. There are also far-reaching and significant social consequences of these attitudes. They can influence peoples' lives, negatively affecting a person's employment opportunities, their social mobility, and their interpersonal relationships. A number of researchers have shown that faulty views of language and a lack of knowledge of linguistics can lead to adverse consequences in the areas of education, healthcare, and in the courtroom (Eades, 2012, 2013; Fine, 2006; Fraser, 2014; Gray, 2010; Heritage and Maynard, 2006; Tiersma, 1999).

It is possible that misconceptions about linguistics and linguists have their origins in existing folk beliefs about language (Niedzielski and Preston, 2010). Despite an increase in research into language in recent decades, myths and misconceptions about language abound (Bauer and Trudgill, 1999; Cameron, 2009; Newbrook, 2013; Stollznow, 2014). Folk beliefs about language are resultant not only of this lack of exposure to linguistics, but exposure to inadequate or false information about language that has been studied in educational materials, read in books written by non-linguists, and gleaned from popular culture (Milambiling, 2001). Many of these beliefs are a reflection of people's anxieties about language.

To examine these phenomena further, this study investigates the following research questions. Among non-linguists, what perceptions and misconceptions exist about linguistics and the work of linguists? And how widespread are these beliefs? The hypothesis was that non-linguists would have misconceptions about linguistics and what linguists do, and that these beliefs would be widespread among the general public. This hypothesis was motivated by observation of the general public's perceptions of linguistics. It is the goal of this research to assist in understanding how non-linguists perceive linguistics and linguists. Furthermore, this paper aims to strengthen the connection between what the general public believes about linguistics, and linguistics in practice.

3. Method and subjects

An online survey was designed to gather impressions about linguistics and linguists from non-linguists. The data was collected using the questionnaire hosting website Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). A set of 14 items was
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