

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring Quarter 2004. Handout 8.

1. Eighth (and last) assignment.

For SIS course, for 26 May: Submit a full proposal for your final paper, as if you were going to be applying to Stanford's Vice President for Undergraduate Education for research funding.

For CSP course, for 24 May: Write a brief review (for a general newspaper, like the *Chronicle* or the *Mercury-News*) of the first chapters of the Cazort book.

Handout this week: pp. 1-27 of Douglas Cazort's *Under the Grammar Hammer*.

2. Why regulate?

2.1. ensure that services are provided

2.2. require certain actions (e.g., paying your taxes)

2.3. ensure useful uniformity (e.g., driving only on one side of the road)

2.4. proscribe certain people or behaviors: institutionalized deploring

(Chief Justice William Rehnquist, in 2003 oral exchanges on the Texas sodomy law case before the U.S. Supreme Court: "Almost all laws are based on disapproval of some people or conduct. That's why people regulate.")

2.5. inculcate obedience to authority; compliant people are good workers

3. Why the sense of threat?

3.1. the perilous status of the elites

3.2. slippery slope arguments, based on Kagan's first "seductive idea", *a passion for abstraction*: characteristics of human beings are matters of abstract properties, which are, moreover, independent of context and invariable in time (intelligence, honesty, etc.) (Jerome Kagan, *Three Seductive Ideas* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998))

4. What's normal (vs. standard)?

4.1. three kinds of normal (cf. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999)) - parallels between attitudes towards the sexes, towards sexuality, towards races and ethnicities, etc., on the one hand and attitudes towards language variation, on the other

A. close to the statistical norm

Karen-Louise Boothe, president of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association, quoted by Warner, p. 166: "NLGJA in no way condones illegal sexual activity in public places... Public sex is as foreign to the lives of most gay people as it is to most straight people."

Warner, p. 167: "The fact that public sex is not the statistical norm ought to have nothing to do with its value of its morality. (Sainthood, when it comes to that, is "foreign to the lives of most gay people.") Boothe succumbs to the hidden lure of the normal, the confusion between what "most" people do and what one ought to do."

Conflicting attitudes about statistical norms in language:

Statistics rule: features of Appalachian English, AAVE, etc. are to be proscribed because they the social groups in question are minorities. (Pure **democracy**.)

Elites rule: features are to be proscribed, even if they are used by a majority of speakers, if they are proletarian, associated with the “common people”.

Reason rules: features are to be proscribed, even if they are used by a majority of elite speakers, if they offend rules articulated on first principles.

B. unremarkable

With respect to sex and sexuality: “stretching the bounds of normal” to treat the participation of women in various spheres of life (and men in others), the ways of living of lgb people, etc. as ordinary, everyday, unremarkable.

With respect to linguistic variants: accepting a wide range of ways of talking and writing as ordinary etc.

The **apologist** stance: Appalachian English, AAVE, etc. *really* are languages, like any others; queers *really* are decent people.

C. normative, i.e. approximating norms (**expectations**) about the characteristics or behaviors of people

normal vs. abnormal, deviant

regulation of norms by example, instruction, moralizing, enforcement

importance of **context** again: frequent conflicts between norms, e.g.

for formality vs. masculinity

cases of **context independence** (e.g. waiting for red light to turn green):

don't use logical-connective *while* and *since*, since they could be misunderstood as temporal connectives

cf: banning various activities (e.g. sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll) because some people lose control, do dangerous things. As a slogan: if abuse is possible, it must be prevented.

4.2. a bouquet of unarticulated beliefs about language (and sometimes other things)

A. There's one right way to do anything. (cf. normative heterosexuality)

B. One word, one meaning: Each word has only one meaning, or very few; the meanings of complex expressions are composed by simple combination from these meanings. (Recall *is being built*.) (cf. each behavior has one social “meaning”)

C. Correct behavior takes work; otherwise, ease and laziness leads you into “degeneration”. People “slip into” casual speech because they aren't careful. Same-sex relationships avoid the work of coping with the other sex, taking on the “adult” roles of partnership and parenthood, etc.; they take the easy route.

D. Non-standard behaviors tend to be attractive and so to spread on their own, unless they are actively resisted. (The standard as the Avis of linguistic variation: We try harder.)

4.3. loaded rhetoric in labeling: linguistic varieties; Warner, p. 181: “The rhetoric of antiporn activism is full of terms like “sleaze,” “filth,” and “smut.”