

Hello and welcome to *Talking about Talk*.

This week's topic is a question we are often asked by listeners: Is there a right way to use language?

Well, the US has no shortage of linguistic gatekeepers. We are warned in the press, on the air, and even on the inside of matchbook covers that, if we don't clean up our linguistic act, the doors of opportunity will be closed. Fear of looking ignorant causes some of us to break out in a sweat when choosing whether to say "between you and me" or "between you and I."

What makes us so linguistically insecure? It's the idea that a language has only one correct form, and that we're not in step with it. But let's remember that what's considered the correct way of speaking is just a matter of history. Saying "between you and me" is a bit like not wearing sneakers with a coat and tie. In other words, it's just a convention, not a divine law. Power, money and prestige cause one variety of language to be preferred and therefore prescribed. In England, the focus of wealth, commerce, and government in London caused a variety of southern British English to be thought of as the best. In the U.S., where there has been no such center, the language of the well-educated, higher classes became the preferred variety.

There will always be people who prescribe how we should talk. They are the ones who are forever pointing out what they see as flaws in other people's speech. Probably because it is the way they speak themselves, they think the preferred language is the only one that's acceptable. These prescribers, or prescriptivists, then try to prove that other varieties of language are deficient or illogical.

If you say "I don't have no money," one of them may tell you that two negatives make a positive, so you have actually said that you *do* have *some* money. But does anybody really believe that someone who says "I don't have none" means they do have something? Are they ever actually misunderstood? I don't think so. The test of a language's effectiveness is not whether it meets a standard, but whether it communicates the intended meaning. A speaker of impeccable English may say silly and illogical things; a speaker of a down-home variety may be logical and precise.

I feel kind of sorry for the watchdog pundits who try to tell us what words to use. It's a losing battle, because ultimately you *can't* prescribe how language should be used. Words don't have one fixed meaning. They only mean what we agree they mean at a certain point in time, and there may be differences from one group to another about that agreement. Besides, language evolves. Some of yesterday's acceptable terms may become today's taboos, while the language we used to look down on may become our preferred form of English. You may deplore it if *you're* a speaker of the preferred form, but most often, as language evolves, it adjusts in the direction of how lower-status speakers use it. Nobody really knows why. Maybe because we think it's cool not to sound too educated, maybe because there are more people who don't have a grasp of current grammar rules. Who cares? It doesn't make it wrong or deficient. It's just what language does.

That said, society will always make judgments. It's a reality in the U.S. that speakers who use double negatives will earn disapproval from certain people, some with power over what we hope to get out of life. If you're not a natural speaker of the preferred variety of language, there *are* social and economic advantages to learning it. It could be your passport to acceptance and success. But, if you're going to do it, do it just to play the game. Always remember that it *is* only a historical convention, and no more logical or beautiful than the variety you already speak.

Well, that's our language thought for the day. And this is the Five-Minute Linguist at the College of Charleston, in co-operation with the National Museum of Language. Visit us at cofc.edu/linguist and let us know your views. Next week we'll be thinking about how far a computer can go in composing its own language. In the meantime, keep talking – in whatever way you choose.