

# Language Matters : A Guide to Everyday Questions about Language

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Donna Jo, Napoli. (2003). **Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Questions about Language.**  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Language Matters is a must read book for students in a linguistics program or a language program and language teachers. The book is both enjoyable and educational. The author provides thought provoking chapter titles by using a question format for each chapter, which brings controversial issues about language to the readers' attention. The author then lays out the evidence on each topic to convince the readers and concludes each chapter tactfully. The author's anecdotes and arguments are entertaining and convincing. When readers disagree with her at certain points, they can easily reanalyze the evidence to counterbalance her argument. This is because the author covers the issues in logical progression. Recommended reading and websites at the end of each chapter are valuable resources. The book is divided into two parts. Part I concentrates on language and human ability. The chapters in part I cover six important questions on the human ability to learn language, which are: How do we acquire language? Why is it hard to learn a second language? Does language equal thought? Are sign languages real languages? Do animals have language? Can computers learn language? Part II contains six controversial issues of language and society, which are: Whose speech is better? Why do dialects and creoles differ from standard language? Do men and women speak differently? And who cares? English spelling is hard, and it makes learning to read hard. Should we do anything about

it? Should the United States adopt English as our official language and overhaul our educational system accordingly? Does exposure to and use of offensive language harm children?

The first two chapters of the book deal with language acquisition. Chapter 1 covers first language acquisition and Chapter 2 describes second language acquisition. The author describes the misconception of how children learn language. She offers critical review of language development and anecdotal evidence of her children acquiring English. In Chapter 2, the author disambiguates the concepts of acquisition and learning. Second language learning takes place through conscious learning, while first language acquisition is a more natural and unconscious process. The author suggests that second language learning will be more successful if the target language is taught in a meaningful and interactive way and scaffolding is regularly adopted. However, her main point in this chapter is translation. The presentation of arguments in support of holistic translation is a good blend of the data and linguistic theory. Chapter 3 discusses that language and thought are not equivalent. The author provides evidence to support that thinking processes do not require language. Chapter 4 is concerned with whether sign languages are real languages. The author describes four parameters of a sign, which are palm orientation, location, movement, and hand shape to convince the readers that sign languages are real languages. The last two chapters in part I deal with language and animal and computer languages. Chapter 5 concentrates on animal communication. The author cites the classic example of Noam Chomsky, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." and illustrates the distinction of language as opposed to communication. Human language involves cognitive processing but animal communication does not. Chapter 6 focuses on the issue of voice recognition programs on computers. The author introduces the suspicious claim that computer can learn language. The computer-human conversation is questionable due to linguistic reasons. The author ends the chapter with an unanswered question of how computers could respond to the question, "Why won't you go into that room?" accompanied with seven possible answers.

The first chapter in the second part of the book deals with language variation and attitudes. The author discusses two important factors, perception and production, that influence language change. That means people hear utterances differently. On the other hand, they do not pronounce what they hear in the same way. Chapter 8 also introduces an additional factor contributing to language change. Language contact situations lead to the creation of pidgins and later into creoles. Some creoles will gain “ language” status. The characteristics of pidgins and creoles are also discussed. Chapter 9 concentrates on social factors that influence language change. In this chapter, the author lists six important claims of conversational behaviors of males and females. The speech differences revealed from the data show interruption, topic ignorance, topic change, curse words, nonstandard forms, and acceptance of language change. In fact, linguists are more likely to pay close attention to the last two conversational behaviors because they render the most revealing data contributing to language change. The author provides examples of methodological concern in sociolinguistic studies that males and females talk differently by raising the issue of lexicon and gender roles. In fact, the linguistic difference in vocabulary for women is more often used by feminine men or vice versa. The factor influencing language choice is sociological, not biological. Chapter 10 focuses on the issues of achieving literacy skills in English. The author is concerned with young American children who have struggled with literacy. Moreover, she points out that technological advancements such as chat rooms on the internet as well as text messaging on cell phones have led to simplified spellings, resulting in struggling with literacy. Not surprisingly, many educators and educational organizations in the United States have called for spelling reform. The author questions whether spelling reform can solve the problems of illiteracy in American children. She provides evidence in support of sociological problems and concludes that spelling reform is good but it will not be a remedy for illiteracy. The healing process takes time; therefore she suggests that reading to children and providing good books to both young children and adults to read will solve literacy

problems. Chapter 11 is concerned with the English Only Movement (EOM) in the United States. The author likens the EOM to movements in other multi-lingual and cultural societies. She discusses the advantages of ESL programs in the United States that immigrant children benefit from. Later she concludes that a bilingual program is more effective than an immersion program. However, she admits that a practical problem still remains, because bilingual education is quite expensive. The last chapter covers the censorship of offensive languages in order to control language change. The author addresses two misconceptions about language in the United States: grammaticality and censorship. However, the author is more concerned with the second one. This is because censorship, especially in children's books, will deprive children of exposure to the real world. She insists that inappropriate language such as curse words will not harm the children due to the fact that language does not equal thought. The counterargument is that children will learn bad language and unacceptable behavior through the characters in the book. The exploration of language choice will raise children's awareness of appropriate language use.

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