

WORKSHOP 1

OUR LANGUAGES AND HOW WE USE THEM

We all have our own way of speaking, influenced by many factors including our family, our friends, our peers, and the wider world – the music we listen to, the TV that we watch, and so on. We also have *different* ways of speaking, depending on who we are speaking to, and the situation we find ourselves in. Our language can vary in terms of lexis (the words we use), grammar (its structure), and pronunciation. There are all kinds of conventions, or even unspoken ‘rules’, that govern the kinds of language that can be used in particular contexts. You might already have some thoughts about these.

First, let’s listen to and talk about some examples of ‘non-standard’ usage.

Either –

Dizzee Rascal and Baroness Amos interviewed by Jeremy Paxman on *Newsnight*:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00r29pf>

- How would you characterize each of the three speakers’ language? Are there any words or phrases which they use repeatedly? Why do you think they speak as they do?
- The discussion is about contemporary politics in the US and UK. How does each speaker’s language use reflect their participation in this kind of discussion?

Or –

Phone Shop:

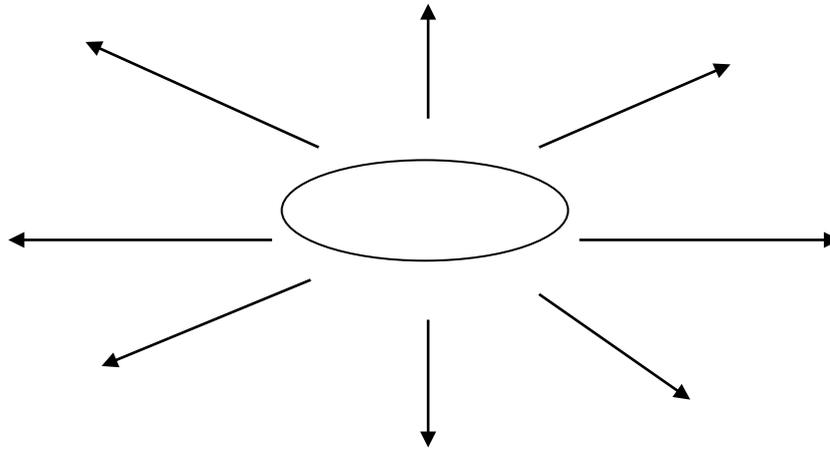
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpJn_EMW7hQ

Goodness Gracious Me:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTTBPELubFI>

- How would you characterize how the characters in each sketch use language? Where does their language come from? Each sketch plays on language use, in different ways, to make its audience laugh. How does this work – what is funny about them?

Thinking about what we’ve said so far, let’s reflect on our *own* languages. What are the influences which affect the way we speak (for example: family, friends, teachers, faith community, TV, popular music – you may be able to think of others)? Do particular kinds of language we use, or ways of speaking, relate to particular contexts? If you speak more than one language (for example, you may use another language at home) then how do you decide when and how to use them? Use this diagram or one like it to represent your ideas, and draw more arrows if you need to!



Now add to your diagram, by including some words or phrases which are particularly closely connected to, or representative of, particular areas of your own personal 'language map'. You might use this opportunity to reflect on your favourite words or phrases, or those which you feel are particularly distinctive to the way you speak. What are their associations? Where do they come from?

If you were going to write a poem now, then which of these words or phrases would you choose to begin it with? Can you explain why you've chose this word or phrase? What kind of a poem would it be?

Are there any words or phrases on your diagram which you definitely *wouldn't* use in a poem? Can you explain why?

[You may want to conclude this discussion by giving students 5-10 minutes to work on the poem they've started to think about.]

Now let's do a quick bit of writing – just one line, for now!

I'm going to give everyone a slip of paper, and I'd like you to write just one sentence. Everyone's sentence should begin in the same way:

'When I speak I....'

OR

'The sound of my voice...'

but you can finish the sentence in any way you like.

Take your time over this, really think – what kind of thing do you want to say with your sentence? What's particularly on your mind right now?

Write down your sentence, and I'm going to pass round a box so you can put it in there. (And you don't have to put your name on it, your sentence can be anonymous!)

And now – taking them out and looking at them together – they look like possible lines for a poem, or for lots of different kinds of poems! Let’s read them out so that we can see what we’ve got.

Either –

The teacher can take the lines and type them up into one poem or several poems, for group discussion. How do you feel about this ‘collective poem’ or ‘collective poems’? What effect does the ‘voice’ of your individual line, its mood or its message, contribute to the poem as a whole?

Or –

In groups – work on possible arrangements of the lines into poems. What effects can you make using the repetition and rhythm of the different lines? What kinds of ideas, themes, or moods do you find emerging in the poem/s you are making?

* * *

FURTHER RESOURCES

EXAMPLES

Here are some examples from the above writing exercise, although yours will of course turn out differently! These come from *Reading/Writing Multilingualism* 2015-16, and I typed them up at the end of our first session, for discussion at the beginning of the following workshop. The first version uses all the lines which we collected. The second version makes particular selection in terms of lines and stanza arrangement: This kind of exercise may also be useful in discussing choice and arrangement in poetry.

When I speak... Version 1

When I speak I find myself on a journey, a journey of words.
When I speak I often forget what I’m saying.
When I speak I question the silence that questions me.
When I speak I... chat shit.
When I speak I hear myself sounding older, but not wiser.
When I speak I can’t ever go without saying UM
When I speak I don’t, I just don’t.
When I speak, I sometimes mimic a different accent.
When I speak I attempt to amplify my inner voice and thoughts in an appropriate manner depending on the situation.
When I speak I don’t speak.
When I speak I sometimes get annoyed at the sound of my own voice!
When I speak I tend to infer an inner joke, resulting in laughter. Maybe.
When I speak, I hesitate at what I want to reveal.
When I speak I get tongue tied.
When I speak I am loud on the inside but quiet on the inside.
When I speak I speak.

When I speak I... try to be articulate.
When I speak I say what's on my mind. Say what might be on my other friends' mind?
Say what I think would be right. Say what others may say about mine. Should I say what's on my mind?
When I speak, I stumble over words more frequently than I probably should.
When I speak... (it's up to you to interpret it the way you want to).

When I speak... Version 2

When I speak I often forget what I'm saying
When I speak I can't ever go without saying UM
When I speak I sometimes get annoyed at the sound of my own voice!
When I speak I get tongue tied.

When I speak I... try to be articulate
When I speak I am loud on the inside but quiet on the outside
When I speak, I stumble over words more frequently than I probably should
When I speak, I hesitate at what I want to reveal.

When I speak I don't speak.
When I speak I don't, I just don't.

FURTHER WRITING IDEAS

Write either a short radio script, or a short story, which draws on one or more of the subjects we have been discussing: language use, language variation, and the relationship between speaking and writing. You might, for example, want to

- write something that makes humour out of how people use language in particular ways
- draw on ideas you developed in writing your 'language map' for inspiration
- write something based on one or more of your favourite words
- write a response to one of the passages you read.

FURTHER DISCUSSION IDEAS

Here are three passages from three novels which are set in London, which all use different kinds of 'speech' in different ways. In small groups, read and discuss them, thinking about the following questions.

- Think about the narrator in each passage – what kind of a voice do they have, and how would you describe their relationship to the characters or action they are narrating?
- How would you characterize the language they use (lexis and grammar), and where do you think it comes from?
- What methods do they use for negotiating between how people speak, and how it's written on the page?
- What effects are created (for example: atmosphere, theme, sense of setting, suspense, humour) through the way language is used?

– Serve him right he got his muthafuckin face fuck'd, shudn't b callin me a Paki, innit.

After spittin his words out Hardjit stopped for a second, like he expected us to write em down or someshit. Then he sticks in an exclamation mark by kickin the white kid in the face again. – Shudn't b callin us Pakis, innit, u dirrty gora.

Again, punctuation came with a kick, but with his left foot this time so it was more like a semicolon. – Call me or any a ma bredrens a Paki again an I'ma mash u an yo family. In't dat da truth, Pakis?

-- Dat's right, Amit, Ravi an I go, – dat be da truth.

The three a us spoke in sync like we belonged to some tutty boy band, the kind who sing the chorus like it's some blonde American cheerleader routine. Hardjit, Hardjit, he's our man, if he can't bruck-up goras, no one can. Ravi then delivers his standard solo routine: – Yeh, blud, safe, innit.

– Hear wat my bredren b sayin, sala kutta? Come out wid dat shit again n I'ma knock u so hard u'll b shittin out yo mouth 4 real, innit, goes Hardjit, with an eloquence an conviction that made me green with envy. Amit always liked to point out that brown people don't actually go green: – We don't go red when we been shamed an we don't go blue when we dead, he'd said to me one time. – We don't even go purple when we been bruised, just a darker brown. An still goras got da front to call *us* coloured.

Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006).

They got proper names them two init but everyone still call them by there tags what are everywhere on all them like stairwell and flats and playground round here – least where they aint been washed off yet or painted over. And they are Ruji-Babes and Foxy T.

Both of them girl work up the E-Z Call phone shop and internet up Cannon Street Road. That is they switch on all the computers them and log on or whatever then switch on the network and get them phone meter running so like at whatever time you can see who is in like booth number two calling Russia or back home wherever and how much it cost. And they make sure theres all the main phone cards in stock init and then order new ones in when there running out or whatever. And like switch on the photocopier since man can get them copy there and all. And make sure its got all paper in it and that. And they probaly thought since the E-Z Call is owned by Ruji-Babes uncle whose been out in Bangladesh or wherever for some little while that theyd be sorted there for as long as they want init. Because people have always got to get on the internet for there emails and do photocopying or buy phone cards or phone there families to make sure that the money they sent over got there OK and shit like that.

Tony White, *Foxy-T* (2003).

Listen, if someone comes disrespecting me, said the boy, I'm gonna tell them to get off my fucking case. Did she address me respectfully though? Don't lie, cos they all heard you and no you didn't.

YOU CANNOT SMOKE IN A CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND. Shouted the old lady. From the bench.

But why did she have to get in my face in that manner? Enquired the boy.

She has a right! Insisted the Rasta woman.

Just put it out. Said Natalie. This is a playground.

Listen, I don't do like you lot do round here. This ain't my manor. We don't do like you do here. In Queen's Park. You can't really chat to me. I'm Hackney, so.

This was an unwise move, rhetorically speaking. Even the lounging girl groaned.

Oh, NO. Said the Rasta. No you didn't. No no no. You having a laugh? *I'm Hackney?* So? SO? Listen, you can try and mess with these people but you can't mess with me, sunshine. I know you. In a deep way. I'm not Queen's Park, love, I'm HARLESDEN. Why would you talk about yourself in that way? Why would you talk about your area that way? Oh you just pissed me off, boy. I'm from Harlesden – certified youth worker. Twenty years. I am ashamed of you right now. You're the reason why we're where we are right now. Shame. Shame!

Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah. Said the boy. The girl laughed.

You think this is funny? Said the Rasta. Keep laughing, my sista. Where do you think this leads? Said the Rasta, to the girl.

Me? But I ain't even involved! How am I even involved?

Nowhere. Said Natalie. Nowhere. Nowhere. NOWHERE.

Mummy stop shouting! Said Naomi.

Natalie did not know why she was shouting. She began to fear she was making herself ridiculous.

I feel sorry for you, really. Said a previously uninvolved Indian man, who now joined the circle of judgement. You're obviously very unhappy, dissatisfied young people.

Oh my days don't you fucking start! Cried the girl.

Zadie Smith, *NW* (2012).