

Everyday Linguistics



Noticing, Collecting and Analysing Language

If you've just started studying AS or A Level English Language, you're at the beginning of a course that will change the way you think about the language that is all around you. Linguist Dr Fiona English shows how the smallest things, like public notices, can become fascinating bits of data for investigation.

How often do you notice language, I mean *really* notice it? And when you do notice it, what kinds of things make you notice it? Perhaps it's because someone has irritated you by omitting to say sorry or thanks. Maybe someone adopts a particular tone that you think sounds patronising. It could be because you yourself are struggling to put your thoughts into words? Or maybe you see something written in a strange way on a public sign. Essentially, we pay most attention to things when they become relevant to us. For example, if you're looking to get a new pair of trainers you'll probably find yourself paying more attention to the trainers other people are wearing. If you're working on a gender project in, say, sociology, you will find yourself paying attention to whether your female and male friends do things differently. And if you happen to be a linguist, particularly one who's interested

in social interaction, you'll pay attention to the everyday language phenomena you encounter anywhere you are in the world.

From Noticing to Collecting

Noticing is only the starting point. It's what you do next that matters. Friends of linguists often look on in bemusement when we stop midway through whatever we're doing at the time to collect something. Even the most mundane piece of communication can raise questions about themes that go well beyond the 'text' itself and lead to understandings not only about the language that surrounds us but about how and why people communicate in the ways they do. For example, we might note down a fragment of overheard conversation, or stop and take a picture of a small ad in a newsagent's window or hang on to an old newspaper found behind the wallpaper when redecorating a house. The old newspaper might tell us something about how language use changes over time. The small ad might be written in an unfamiliar language which could tell us something about the movement of people and the overheard conversation might provide an example of current youth usage.

Language Questions and Linguistics Answers – the Case of the 'Polite Notice'

So now let's do a bit of linguistics based around a language phenomenon that I

noticed when queuing for some stamps in my local Post Office. Luckily I had my smartphone with me (an essential tool for linguists to record bits of everyday language phenomena they come across) so was able to take a photo of it as a reminder and as evidence of the phenomenon that it represented to me (Fig 1). Other customers were curious as to why I took the photograph and you might be too. What is it about this seemingly ordinary sign asking customers to pay for their cards and envelopes before they hand them in for posting that made me think it special enough to record? The answer is that by using the heading, 'Polite Notice', the people who made it were positioning it as a very particular kind of sign with a particular kind of status within a particular kind of context, promoting a particular kind of message for a particular kind of purpose. In other words, they were labelling it as belonging to what we might call the 'polite notice' genre, which, like all genres, fosters expectations of what it should look like, what it's for and what it's supposed to do. What made me notice this particular 'polite notice' was that it didn't conform to my expectations of the genre. It didn't fit with what I imagine when I think of a 'polite notice' like the one in Figure 2 (overleaf) which is a perfect example of the genre.

Same but Different

By juxtaposing the two versions, it becomes clear that the Post Office sign promotes a very different kind of message compared with the sign on the railings. It draws on a very different set of visual and linguistic resources compared to the more classic version in the second picture. What makes the difference is not in the core aim of each – they both seek to regulate other people's behaviour – but in the way they seek to achieve this, and in order to understand how and why this might be the case you would need to analyse them more closely.

One way to approach it is by thinking about how the **context** (place, participants,



Fig 1

purpose) affects the design of the text under investigation and how the design choices produce the desired meanings. In the ‘railings’ sign (Fig 2), the anonymity of addresser (the sign setter) and addressee (e.g. the cyclist seeking to leave their bike) is both reflected in and promoted by the impersonal language used with its passive, agentless verb forms and the bland off-the-peg design. And what are we to make of the uncompromising ‘without further notice’? This seems to have been borrowed wholesale from legally binding, regulatory documents such as final demands for unpaid bills. All these choices give the message a tone of legitimacy even though the exact authority of such notices is not entirely clear. This contrasts strongly with the approach adopted in the Post Office



where both the staff and the customers are both present and visible. The more intimate environment of the Post Office, at least in comparison to a public highway, is reflected in the amateur homemade sign with its decorative elements. The language choices the Post Office staff have made in composing their message urging the customers to ‘pay’ is mitigated by the use of ‘please’ to make the demand sound more like a request. There is no described punitive element, unlike the railings sign, and there is no obvious attempt to sound official. Legitimacy, in the case of the Post Office sign is taken for granted – it is understood that people should pay for things before using them – whereas out on the street, where railings are often fair game for cyclists to attach their bikes to, a more authoritative tone might be thought to be more effective.

There are many other questions we could have explored from the starting point of the case of the ‘polite notice’. For instance, we could have developed a discussion about **register**, the way we adjust our language choices to suit a given situation – formal and informal language. We could have looked at the notion of **politeness** and how it’s

reflected in language and other forms of communication. We could have considered **cultural norms and behaviours** in connection with the making of requests or demands and whether these travel effectively across cultures or even generations. As pointed out, noticing is only the start.

So What’s Polite about a Polite Notice?

The question about what is polite about a polite notice has not been answered. Perhaps the ‘polite notice’ is used to reflect a sense of annoyance, of being fed up with certain behaviours by other people that have a negative impact on you. Perhaps, after all, the ‘polite notice’ is polite in the sense of ‘considerate’, asking others to be considerate for your benefit rather than being necessarily considerate yourself! However, as the final picture shows (Fig 3), when language travels, meanings and uses may alter. Like the Post Office sign, this one really does mean to be polite, but unlike the Post Office sign, doing what it tells you to do is more for the benefit of the reader of the sign than the writer. It was stuck onto the door leading to a small balcony on the fifteenth floor of a hotel in Tashkent and was advising guests not to lock themselves out. Luckily we noticed it first from the perspective of a hotel guest and only secondly from that of a linguist!

Linguistics Everyday

We use language all the time but we tend to take it for granted, only noticing it when there’s some kind of a problem, as I pointed out right at the beginning of this article. The case study used in this discussion has, I hope, shown that even the most mundane things can lead to thinking about how language works, how the choices we make, even small shifts in grammar, affect the meanings we produce. With just a little bit of linguistic knowledge, everyone can do linguistics. In fact, you probably do linguistics without realising that that’s what you’re doing – even at school. When in History you analyse different accounts of the same event to see how bias can enter historical understanding you are actually doing what, in linguistics, is called **discourse analysis**. When in physics or biology you learn the meanings and uses of certain specific terms you are becoming a member of a particular **discourse community** where everyone speaks the same ‘language’ – often considered as jargon by those outside that community. When you need to ask a teacher for an extension on some coursework you probably don’t just blurt out ‘Give me an extension!’ you

think about *how* you might best say it to get the outcome you want. In other words, you would be thinking about what in linguistics is known as **register**, that is, taking account of who you’re talking to, where and why. This is precisely the point that Professor Michael Halliday made during a student conference in Belfast in 2011 when he said,

Linguistics is everywhere because language is everywhere.

Now it’s up to you to go out and find it!

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