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BOOK REVIEW



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Making Sense of "Bad English": An introduction to language attitudes and ideologies, Elizabeth Peterson, Routledge (2020), xxiv+166 ISBN: 978-1-13823746-9

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Making Sense of "Bad English" tries to convey the idea that since language is dynamic, "Good English" or "Bad English" is something relative and subject to changes in accordance with social changes and the speakers in the community. Elizabeth Peterson provides a form of scientific-linguistic tool for language users for a fair judgement of English language varieties before labelling them bad.

The book starts with the motivation behind the author's choice of the topic for her project. Then special terms used in the book are well-defined in a few pages. Making a distinction between language scientist and linguist, the author prefers to use the former in her book. For her, a linguist is a person who speaks many languages, while a language scientist is someone who studies a language scientifically.

The author draws on Kachru's (1982) Three Circles Model for the speakers of English worldwide, explaining each of the circles of the speakers. In this Model, the inner circle refers to those countries where English is used as a native or first language among people. The outer circle includes countries where English has a second language status. The countries placed in this circle are mostly former colonies of the UK and the USA such as Malaysia, Singapore and India. The last circle, the expanding circle, is made up of countries that introduce English as a foreign language in schools and universities. China and Japan are examples of expanding circle countries.

The book is organized in two parts. Part one is made up of five chapters. The intention in this part is to bring home to the reader what the terms "Good English" and "Bad English" mean, how they were developed and the reason for their existence.

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Part two includes four chapters. With the exception of chapter six which is concerned with the acquisition of English as a mother tongue, subsequent chapters of part two present some case studies from the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. There is a summary offered for part two while the summary page is missing for part one. Chapter ten, the concluding one, stands alone and deals with the extent to which the book has been successful in accomplishing its aims and goals.

As the title of the first chapter signifies, it deals with the notion of bad English in the outer circle, where English has a second language status and in the expanding circle where English is used as a lingua franca. In a survey illustrated with graphs and figures, the chapter evaluates students' attitudes toward standard English and dialects of English in Finland and in the U.S. The chapter then moves on to the idea of bad English in the expanding circle. It is concerned with the young generations, the way they acquire English and its role in their daily life.

The notions of “good” and “bad English” are investigated from social and historical perspectives in chapter two. Standardization processes of English which goes through four stages i.e. selection, codification, implementation, and elaboration are discussed in this chapter. The author mentions that the idea of standardized English, viewed from a historical angle, is human-made and full of defects.

Chapter three, titled “Bad English” in the inner circle setting, introducing new trends in a language, examines the role of young women as innovators. Subsequently, social power – a factor causing marginalized social groups to speak and write “bad English” – is brought to light.

In chapter four there are some examples about the relation between language and social justice. The author puts forward an instance of a court case about the violation of linguistic needs of students. Accordingly, judicial system is at the service of those participating in standard language culture. The argument is that linguistic discrimination still lingers in many classrooms, and many school children are subject to linguistic discrimination which brings about challenges for some marginalized students. As an example one can refer to a court case related to the education of African American children at Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Out of 13 percent of African American students studying in this school only 15 students were represented in the court case. These students spoke a variety of African American English, distant from standard English used at school, that distinguished them from other students. These minority students were “suspended, disciplined and repeatedly retained” at grade level and labeled as “handicapped” (Smitherman, 1081, p. 41).

Through experiments mentioned in this chapter, first the author demonstrates a relation between language and attitudes and then addresses the outcome of these attitudes specifically in three areas: school environment, justice system and the workplace.

In chapter five, the reasons for the existence of so called “Bad English” and deviation from standard English are surveyed. Chapters four and five look into “Bad English” from two different viewpoints. While the first one investigates it from a social perspective the second one does so from the speakers' stand point. Making the reader mindful of linguistic variation, the author tries to provide a convincing answer to the following questions: 1. Why do distinct varieties of English still exist? 2. Why are “Bad English” or bad varieties of English, if any, spoken purposefully by people? One of the important findings that counteract general beliefs is that some varieties of language, depending on the individual or the context can be considered prestigious.

Most readers may already be familiar with the acquisition of English as a mother tongue, and the stages children go through in this process. By highlighting the process in chapter six, the purpose of the author is, to showcase the interesting fact that first language speakers of standard English use most of the features of L1 in their speech which would have been considered bad and unacceptable if they were adults.

Black English Matters, as chapter seven, signifies that those interested in the characteristics of African American English may find some novel ideas and wealth of information on its origins, discourse, style, communication and grammatical features as well. The terms like Ebonics, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American English, African American Language, or Black English allude to a group of dialects of English spoken all over the United States mostly by Black people.

While the points discussed in chapters six and seven are concerned with the inner circle language studies, chapter eight addresses the outer circle. Since the outer circle spreads all around the world, this chapter limits the exploration to two notions, i.e. language contact and transfer effects. Although the discussions are confined to a handful of varieties in the outer circle, some appealing delicate notions are brought to light in this chapter.

English as an international language or English as a lingua franca (ELF), as a relatively new field of study, along with its historical background, is the topic surveyed in chapter nine. Based on Jerkins' (2000) findings one comes across a proposal for the empirical and contrived lingua franca core with its three subdivisions. Jerkins maintains that in order for English language learners to be more intelligible, they need to learn specific phonological features.

In the final chapter of the book titled Conclusions, the author restates the goals of writing the present book and the extent that it has accomplished its goals. She hopes reading the book and getting familiar with the social contexts and historical roots of some dialects and varieties of English would help the reader to view them differently.

As a way of evaluation, the title of the book may be confusing for some readers; one may think that the author would possibly show the way to distinct borderline separating "good English" from "bad English. However, looking through the eyes of Elizabeth Peterson as a researcher, exploring facts, figures, and real life cases presented in this book, the reader, far from bigotry, language biases, prejudice or, linguistic discrimination, realizes that the term "bad English" is a means at the hands of people in power: often white, middle- and upper-class populations, to look down upon or to make a laughing stock of marginalized groups in the society. Nevertheless, those with relatively high social power are considered to speak and write good English. Certain language features are disdained because they are related to a certain social class with a low social status.

On the positive side, there is a nice transition from each chapter to the next one. In the introduction of each new chapter Elizabeth Peterson very clearly reminds to the reader what was discussed previously and how it is related to the next topic of the discussion ahead. The book is fantastic in compactness of form and clarity of expression. There is a conceptual coherence and the ideas and notions can be easily followed by the reader.

Elizabeth Peterson should be commended for the simplicity of language and smooth writing style which makes the book easily digestible for approximately any audience with an average level of English. She offers an eye-opening experience to ponder on something which has already been taken for granted; higher status of so called standard English, and lower status of other English language varieties.

To assist comprehension of the text, some eye-catching boxes with useful information are included within chapters to bring home to the reader the ideas about some themes and notions of historical or social importance. Besides, the book enjoys a range of effective pedagogical tools including questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.

Perhaps prior to studying the present book to be able to get the most of the book, for a richer background information and in order to get better connected to the book, the reader may refer to sources like “New Englishes” by John Platt (1984), which bring to light the English language varieties spread all over the world and also “International English: A Guide to Varieties of Standard English” by Peter Trudgill and Jean Hannah (2017).

The good point about the book is that it deals with the roots of matters surveyed, focusing on the details for fostering deeper appreciation and understanding of the topic. In doing so, the book is loaded with examples, maps, investigations, graphs, facts and figures. Since the examples are taken from real life situations, the reader gets a clear picture of what the author tries to convey. While delving deep into the matter of “Bad English” sub-topics like those related to “language and racism”, “language and identity” and “language and culture” are briefly touched too. In short, the book is a valuable resource for people from all walks of life who are keen on knowing about language and linguistic related issues.

The main flaw of the book is the limited number of Englishes surveyed in the book. Nonetheless the author herself confesses to it and promises to compensate for it in future editions of the book. Had the book investigated more dialects and varieties of English, it would have been more beneficial. As we know, phonetics is particularly important to surveys in sociolinguistics; it is also important to the sociolinguistics of dialectology. Unfortunately, the book lacks substantial discussions about sociophonetic aspects of dialects of English in relation to so called Bad English. And finally, the index does not meet the demands of the reader. For an easier navigation of the book, the index needs to include more key words to make it more informative to the reader.

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