

Correctness, Incorrectness, and Correction

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Correction refers to the elimination of variation and labeling of perceived errors in grammatical forms, linguistic styles, and communicative acts. Cast in moralistic and polarizing terms such as “proper” or “improper,” “pure” or “corrupted,” “intelligible” or “unintelligible,” “face-saving” or “face-threatening,” “standard” or “non-standard,” and “appropriate” or “inappropriate,” each token of these unmarked–marked pairs iconically indexes the presumed essence of a language user and community. The linguistic and semiotic ideologies that animate these signs through moral narratives also broadly articulate with nationalist, multicultural, or revitalization movements and pervade the institutional domains of science, religion, education, commerce, and law. As a human universal and sociocultural construct, thus, claims and acts of correctness/incorrectness/correction are as ubiquitous as they are contingent and contestable.

Anthropologists and other language scholars who analyze the forms, practices, and ideologies of correction seek to advance discussions of language and power by drawing on theories and methods in conversation analysis, language socialization, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. This entry explores the range of folk and academic conceptions of correctness/incorrectness/correction to highlight three points. First, signs of linguistic and cultural error are rendered as problematic variation through the promotion of standard language ideologies associated with colonial, nationalist, religious, and neoliberal projects. Second, although identified as a human universal, correction is a culturally specific feedback strategy responsive to sociohistorically situated theories of self, knowledge, and identity. Third, correction becomes generative of political and economic value when it is inculcated as a social and moral good. In conclusion, studies of correction would benefit from historical inquiry and comparative analysis to elucidate the interplay between these factors.

Language standardization

Prescriptive norms regarding language use draw attention to how signs of linguistic and cultural variation can be simultaneously or interchangeably interpreted as sources and sites of error in the ethnological and historical record. For example, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, women’s writing was viewed as replete with incorrect grammar and subjected to educational reform. In colonial south India, Protestant and Catholic missionary presses competed to define what is correct Tamil by identifying and linking together errors of grammatical form, typography, religious doctrine, and

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colonial policy (Das 2017). Notions of “cultural correctness” in Soviet-era Ukraine associated signs of linguistic purity with aesthetic ideals of “culturedness” and national identity (Bilaniuk 2005), whereas the Rio Grande Pueblos in the US Southwest attribute the ideal of “perfectability” to ritual and linguistic knowledge and gloss “correction” as the care invested in “creating cultural objects and imbuing them with value” (Debenport 2012, 213).

Through such religious, nationalist, revitalization, and other social movements, notions of correction have led to the institutionalization or reinforcement of standard language ideologies. These ideologies instigate alarmist discourses about the joint deterioration of grammars and nations and generate policies designed to safeguard the rules of verbal conduct and grammatical usage among a national population (Cameron 2012). In societies where the language of school instruction coincides with the home language of elites, correction promotes a belief in the self-evident existence of the standard language and justifies acts of linguistic discrimination (Lippi-Green 1997). Even in the United States, where English is not fully codified, speakers of non-standard and foreign languages, who are predominantly ethnoracial minorities, are disproportionately accused of intelligibility errors and linguistic deficiency in English, whereas speakers of Standard English can incorrectly use foreign languages with relative impunity. In addition, the dismissal of social justice efforts to replace lexical items deemed insulting to racial, gender, and other minorities as mere “political correctness” reinforces the “idea of a universal or neutral language” central to the naturalizing practices of standardization policies (Cameron 2012, 122). Theoretical and historical linguists who have traditionally regarded canonical forms associated with writing, education, and literature as worthier of study than spoken language are not immune to this bias. Neither are variationist sociolinguists who identify particular groups as always engaging in “hypercorrection,” such as the lower middle classes and women believed to over-produce high prestige forms due to their sensitivity to social pressure, without taking into account the dialectics of token-type recognition (Silverstein 2003). Standardization thus recursively justifies social stratification by valorizing its ideological products, including the very categories of class, race, gender, and ethnic difference.

Conversational repair

Generative of political and economic value, correction is inculcated as a social and moral good through the everyday socialization and learning practices that teach novices how to use language correctly in appropriate contexts. Although clarification is indeed a human universal, cultural norms select for corrective strategies that reflect local theories of self, knowledge, and identity. Illustrating this dynamic are studies in conversation analysis that draw on a model of conversational repair, defined as the “replacement of an ‘error’ or ‘mistake’ by what is ‘correct’” (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977, 362). These studies have shown that repair is usually self-initiated and anticipated by special cues, including cut-off sentences, syllable elongation, intra-turn pauses, and increased speed. By setting the repair apart, such cues indicate that the error is “fault implicative”

and thus “face threatening.” According to the model, conversational repair preserves the state of grace of participants and prevents the possibility of judgment about a lack of social worth.

Yet ethnographic studies of language socialization have also revealed the variability of corrective strategies and uses of conversational repair across diverse sociocultural contexts. For instance, white middle-class American caregivers who feel uncomfortable with the existence of a knowledge gap between adults and children seek to accommodate children through self-lowering or child-raising strategies (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). Whereas white middle-class parents attempt to decipher unintelligible words or phrases rather than correct them, a study of African American working-class children shows them instead correcting errors immediately and with emphatic repetition to signal their opposition (Goodwin 1983). The Bosavi of Papua New Guinea and Western Samoans instead favor clarification strategies in which children are expected to accommodate adults. Samoans believe that children are responsible for ensuring clear expression and adults wait until the meaning of a problematic utterance becomes clear. The Bosavi believe that language acquisition is a process of “hardening” and they scaffold children’s utterances to teach them correct phonological, morphological, and lexical forms (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). These cross-cultural examples demonstrate the ideological mediation of correction and highlight the diverse social values regimenting the interpretation of signs of correctness and incorrectness.

Didactic feedback

More than other settings, schools are institutional sites where socially valued norms of stylistic consistency, grammatical use, phonological accuracy, dialect choice, and contextual appropriateness are explicitly upheld through the discursive labeling of errors. Usually teacher-initiated, didactic feedback represents a type of corrective practice that aims to reconcile the conflicting goals of promoting classroom interaction and teaching the grammatical standard by correcting some linguistic errors and ignoring others. Ignored errors vary by typology and their production by native or non-native speakers. They often mark in-group and out-group boundaries by differentiating between the valuable comments of “good” students and disruptive ones of “bad” students (Wortham 2004, 176). Self-correction among speakers of minority languages can also cultivate metalinguistic or metapragmatic awareness of which and how constructions are typically identified as errors. For example, teachers in Corsica who substitute the word “choice” for “error” in their didactic comments seek to bypass students’ self-critical judgments and encourage them to identify with Corsican and to not feel anxious about making mistakes in public (Jaffe 1993).

Self-correction is further seen as crucial to the semiotic processes of scientific inquiry, including the formulation of hypotheses through abduction, the deduction of predictions through experimentation, and the inductive determination of statistical reliability, which are all mediated by language and semiotic ideologies. Thus, when a science teacher blames a failed experimental lesson on human error rather than challenging the governing scientific law, this response is influenced by her infallible belief in the

language of scientific authority (Viechnicki and Kuipers 2006). Since a semiotic form is never actually “‘wrong’: it just breaks or resets a pattern of established pair-part usage ... as it invokes ... new identities or sociocultural aspects of participants and context” (Silverstein 2003, 210), through comparative and historical analysis the dynamic interplay between corrective strategy and ideology in the social valuation of erroneous forms can be elucidated.

SEE ALSO: African American Languages (AAV, AAEV, Ebonics); Babbling and Baby Talk; Bilingualism and Multilingualism; Child Language; Competence, Communicative and Linguistic; Conversation Analysis (CA); Dialect: Social Class; Diversity, Linguistic; Hedge Words; Hypercorrection; Interaction, Face-to-face; Language Acquisition; Language Change; Language Contact; Language and Education; Language, Globalization, and Colonialism; Language Ideology; Language Revitalization; Language and Social Class; Language Socialization; Literacy; Misunderstanding; Modernity and Tradition; Nation and Nationalism; Norms in Language and Communication; Orthography; Repair: Error and Correction; Semiotics; Sociolinguistics; Speech Community; Standard Language(s); Stereotype; Writing and Writing Systems: History; Writing and Writing Systems: Sociolinguistic Aspects

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