

Thomas Gray Morton

Brian Dillon

Junior Year Writing

24 April 2020

Linguistics: Why We Speak Like We Do

00:00:00 - 00:00:07

[Blank black background; all text appears in white on black background throughout]

Thomas Gray Morton: (off-screen voice) Today I want to ask an important question:

00:00:00 - 00:00:05

[Text: Why do we speak like we do?]

Morton: Why do we speak like we do?

00:00:09 - 00:00:11

And more importantly [Text: Why do you speak like we do?] Why do you speak like you do?

00:00:12 - 00:00:21

[Unbalanced scale icon on black background]

I'm from the south and I remember a teacher once sitting us down and telling us "Ain't, ain't a word and I ain't gonna say it.

00:00:22 - 00:00:26

[Two young kids with arms around each others' shoulders on black background]

This seemed wrong, I mean my friends all said it, but it wasn't a word? We've all been told we're wrong in English class.

00:00:27 - 00:00:39

[Video clip of actress Cameron Diaz in “Bad Teacher” marking student papers with red pen. She writes stupider on the paper while saying: Is this English?]

00:00:33 - 00:00:39

[Blank black background]

Gray Morton: (off-screen voice) But are we really? Who decides why we say the things we do?

00:00:40 - 00:00:44

[Finger pointing toward viewer on black background]

The answer is more obvious than you think. You do, you speak it – so it’s correct

00:00:45 - 00:00:49

[Multicolor circle of stick figures holding hands on black background]

And if your friends speak it, it’s correct to your community too.

00:00:50 - 00:00:54

[Blank black background]

That’s what linguists’ study, the little language community inside of all of us.

00:00:55 - 00:01:01

[Text: Syntax. Why words are arranged the way they are appears below in white text.]

Now, what I study is syntax which is quite simply why words are arranged the way they are.

00:01:02 - 00:01:04

[Text: Have you what done? with multicolor bubbles with question marks inside.]

I try to explain why it’s not: have you what done, but instead

[Text: What have you done]

00:01:05 - 00:01:08

What have you done?

Which, like the question before may seem obvious at first,

00:01:09 - 00:01:12

[Phone and electrical wires crossing in complicated pattern on utility poles]

but can get complicated quick.

00:01:13- 00:01:16

[Handheld magnifying glass]

Now, to really answer that question, we have to do as a linguist would.

Look at speech and ask why?

00:01:17 - 00:01:24

[Yellow sticky note with Why? in blue text. Shifting to blank black background]

What's the shortest sentence you can think of right now?

Whatever you thought of it probably can't get much shorter than mine.

00:01:25 - 00:01:32

[Text: He walks.]

Let's start with He walks

Now, bear with me here, we're going to step back into English class for just a second.

What do we know?

00:01:33 - 00:01:41

[Arrow pointing from He up to Noun in upper left and from walks up to verb in upper right.]

Well, he is a noun, walks is a verb. Simple, right? Put these together and that makes the base for nearly every sentence in English. A syntactician would say that

00:01:42 - 00:01:44

[Arrow pointing down from Sentence to noun and verb labels.]

every sentence [...] to a noun and a verb.

00:01:45 - 00:01:49

[Text: Rule; Text: Which is an instruction your brain follows to say a sentence appears below.]

This is what's called a rule, which is an instruction your brain follows to say a sentence.

00:01:50 - 00:01:27

[Graphic of gears turning inside head of figure]

What I am going to claim is that without even realizing it, you follow thousands of rules completely unconsciously. Your brain knows what you want to say.

00:01:58 - 00:02:09

[Person appears with light bulb next to head and one finger up in an ah-ha moment; graphic of unbalanced scales in gold]

It takes an idea, a completely abstract thing and uses these rules to turn it into a sentence that someone else can understand. Now let's jump back to your English teacher yelling at you.

00:02:10 - 00:02:31

[Video clip from capture of Cool Hand Luke. Actor 1: (as he strikes Actor 2 with a whip/rope) Don't you ever talk that way to me. Never, (Actor 2 falls to the ground, tumbles down a small hill and rolls a short distance while Actor 3 looks on) never. Actor 1: What we've got here is failure to communicate.]

00:02:32 - 00:02:49

[Unbalanced scales graphic in black and white on black background]

Gray Morton: What's really happening here is that you've got a set of rules that develop from listening to your friends and listening to your parents and [unbalanced scales graphic in gold]

appears next to black graphic] it's different from the set of rules that your teacher learned or was taught. So when I said ain't and my teacher said isn't she was hearing me break her own rules.

[Large red no graphic of circle with line through it appears over gold scales] We hear people all around us breaking the rules we learned and cemented.

00:02:50 - 00:03:00

[Graphic of man with eyes closed on black background]

We don't even notice because our brains adapt and pass over to keep us from getting information overload. An English teachers' job is to teach one way to speak, so that filter isn't there.

00:03:01 - 00:03:12

[Figure standing next to large question mark]

Now here is a teaser: Everyone is speaking all different rules and yours might not be the same as mine, or your teacher's. [Close up of shattered glass] Does this bring up any major alarm bells in your brain? Is the sky falling just a little bit?

00:03:13 - 00:03:25

[Video clip of animated film Chicken Little. Chicken Little (ringing bell at top of bell tower and shouting in panic to town): Run for your lives, everyone run for cover! (Mother bunny dangles carrot in front of baby bunny in stroller and looks up) SOS! Mayday, mayday! Code Red! (Two dogs in diner, one gnaws on a bone and the other laps water from a dish on the table) Duck and Cover!]

00:03:26 - 00:03:36

[Graphic style figure sitting and shaking in fear]

Gray Morton: So, you've come to the same crisis that every linguist hits at least once, if not a million times. It's the same little butterflies in your stomach that makes you think there's got to be more to this story.

00:03:37 - 00:03:45

I mean, if everyone is speaking differently what is English? (Red button with question mark)
How do we all speak it if it's not the same everywhere? And if English isn't this rock solid all encompassing thing, what is language?

00:03:46 - 00:03:51

[Red and white life preserver graphic]

Before your gods collapse entirely, let me throw it a life preserver.

00:03:52 - 00:04:10

[Text: Universal Grammar on black background; Appears below: we all speak the same language which has one original set of rules and we all differ in how we speak based on changes or evolutions of these original rules]

Many linguists have developed this theory called a universal grammar. Very simply, the theory of universal grammar is basically that we all speak the same language which has one original set of rules, and we all differ in how we speak based on changes or evolutions of these original rules. Some people differ in their rules more than others and that's where we get languages.

00:04:11- 00:04:18

[Map of Europe centered over Spain, Italy, and Mediterranean]

French differs from Spanish, and Spanish differs from Italian to the extent that they can't understand each other fully. But they were all once the same language.

00:04:19 - 00:04:26

[Text: Language on black background; Appears below in white: A group of people whose rules don't differ enough that they can't understand each other]

So, we could just say that a language, like English, is just a group of people whose rules don't differ enough that they can't understand each other.

00:04:27 - 00:04:54

[Icon of student outline on left and teacher pointing to blackboard icon on right]

To illustrate this, imagine it's you and your teacher again. Your teacher is immortal, she can't die. [Infinity symbol graphic appears below teacher graphic.] Her entire life's purpose is to teach your children [two children waving hello graphics appear below student graphic] and your children's children [four more children waving hello graphics appear below first two] correct and proper English. [Blue conversation bubble icon appears between children and teacher graphics] Well, you already speak a little differently than your teacher and your kids, believe it or not, will speak a little differently than you. This continues for centuries until your teacher, who is still speaking the same old English can't even understand [red no graphic of circle with line through it appears over conversation bubble] your descendants because their rules have changed so much from the origin.

00:04:55 - 00:05:08

[Two black lines parallel but not touching on yellow background]

And this is the basic concept for how languages begin to differ and become separate things. Groups diverge and drift apart. After enough time they come back together and realize they drifted too far apart to speak to each other again.

00:05:09 - 00:05:23

[Unbalanced scales with weights icon]

Now let's go back to syntax. With this new understanding of language, my job isn't to describe so much how people order their words or the way they speak, but to discover what original language looks like. To look at all languages of the world to compare and contrast them in an effort to find their true similarities.

00:05:24 - 00:05:31

[Graphic of blue large triangle made up of smaller blue triangles on white background]

Because languages do have similarities, nearly all languages have the subject at the front of the sentences for instance. But more importantly they can all repeat.

00:05:32 - 00:05:45

[Video clip of young boy. Boy: Have you ever had a dream that, that you umm you had you wou...you could you would do you want you you could do so you do]

00:05:46 - 00:06:10

Gray Morton: Like I have a habit of doing; I talk too much. And I have this ability because I can string words together infinitely.

[Text: The man that loved me that danced on the follow that scared the butler that flew the kite on the cat with the unimaginable amount of space in the house on the swamp filled with cats named George who danced...]

I can say the man that loved me that danced on the floor that scared the butler and so on forever. To really analyze language, to really understand it, you don't look at what people are doing that follows the rules, you look at what people are doing that breaks it. I think I can trust you with a secret, one that a lot of disciplines won't tell you and one that I like to think is the best aspect of linguistics.

00:06:11 - 00:06:22

[Conversation bubbles icon. Red icon on left has question mark and blue icon on right has exclamation point]

We don't have an answer for everything. [Blank black background] What I want to share with you is a problem I have been researching for awhile now. It seems incredibly simple on the surface, almost too simple. The idea starts with this.

00:06:23 - 00:06:58

[Text: John believes him to dance]

Take the sentence John believes him to dance. You might say sentences similar to these everyday. You say them without realizing they break rules that you normally take for granted. Take John for instance, it is the subject of believes. [Text: John believes appears above first sentence] John believes is a sentence on its own. [Text: John believes him appears below first sentence] John believes him is a sentence as well, where him is what John believes. He dances is its own sentence as well. [Text: He dances appears above and to right of first sentence] That is where the issue arises. You have him acting as the thing that John is believing and the subject of dance. Which is something that would normally break every rule that we have. Let me explain why.

00:06:59 - 00:07:09

[Text: John loves divided by long space He dances]

Let's take the two sentences: John loves and He dances. You can combine them with that, like this: [Text: that appears between first two sentences] John loves that he dances. These are two sentences and have things that are called boundaries.

00:07:10 - 00:07:27

[Red brick wall icon appears behind that]

These boundaries are basically a wall between the sentences. One that can't be passed. We also know that if a pronoun like him is inside of a boundary [Text: John loves that himself dances appears below] it can't be himself but if it's outside of the boundary, [red X appears through himself] it can't be called him. This is confusing so let me help to illustrate it.

00:07:28 - 00:08:08

[Text: John loves himself in upper left and John loves him in lower right]

Take these two sentences, John loves himself and John loves him. Where him refers to John in both. I can tell you now that you will unconsciously prefer the first sentence and dislike the second one. [Green check mark by first sentence and red X by second] That is because there is only one sentence here and no boundary. So him wants to be himself. Let's look back at the sentence from before, knowing what we know now, [Text: John believes himself to dance] we can say for instance that John believes himself to dance. Knowing that we have two sentences, we would think that there would be a boundary [brick wall appears behind to] making himself want to be him. But that isn't the case here, so we know that himself is a part of the sentence on the left. But if himself is a part of the sentence on the left what is the subject of to dance? We know we can't have a sentence without a subject.

00:08:09 - 00:08:30

[Graphic of character shrugging using text character style lines]

I'm not here to give you answers, more to make you want to ask questions. And I don't give you answers, not because I want to but because I don't have them and neither does anyone else.

That's what's so amazing about linguistics. You can ask a question no one has ever asked before and that's a dangerous business. Because once you ask a question that has never been answered, you may just get caught like I am.

00:08:31 - 00:08:51

[Graphic of handheld magnifying glass enlarging map with red x]

Searching until I find the truth. I felt it fair to leave off here in a place that many linguists find themselves, as a form of initiation. You are being left with more questions than you had before and less answers than you had wanted. However, it is like the end of a good serial, you get left on a cliff hanger like the rest of us and want to read the next chapter.

00:08:52 – 00:09:04

[Thank you for watching text on black screen with upbeat instrumental music]