LINGUISTIC ERRORS AND OMISSIONS IN DISCUSSIONS OF LANGUAGE MATTERS

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Many authors and presenters who are not linguistically trained discuss matters of language from various standpoints. Many of these discussions involve subjects outside linguistics but adjacent to linguistics, such as psychology or literature. While such discussions typically embody useful insights and discoveries concerning language, they sometimes display limited expertise in linguistics *per se* and ensuing errors, some of them serious.

Of course, non-linguists more generally often have seriously misguided ideas about language. This is not usually their fault; they have not had (or have not found the need to take up) the opportunity to learn about such things, and in consequence are confused by popular myths. For instance, many non-linguists unthinkingly adopt prescriptivist views about usage, according to which even native-speaker usage involves questions of correctness and incorrectness ('We pronounce this word correctly and you mis-pronounce it'). In addition, many seriously mistaken, sometimes absurd, ideas circulate about points of fact concerning language. For example, some Americans believe (as part of a totally inaccurate perception of world history) that the English language began in the USA and spread to the UK from there - and therefore may wonder why English is called *English* or why British people use an American rather than a European language, or may imagine that British English is in fact of recent origin.

More sophisticated thinkers may also come to hold (or to appear to hold) strange/misleading ideas about language. In her Rest Less talk 'Tudor Poets: Shakespeare, Marlowe And All That' (May 2026), the literature scholar Judy Karbritz suggested that English literature began only in Tudor times (after 1485 CE). If we define Modern English as commencing in Tudor times, this claim is platitudinously true; there was no previous Modern English at all But this ignores the large body of poetry and other literature written in Old English and Middle English in the thousand years separating the arrival of English-speakers in what became England from the reign of Henry VII. *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* are outstanding examples. And while untutored modern audiences cannot read *Beowulf* and may even mis-perceive the usage as 'foreign', they can certainly recognise Chaucer's work as being in English - and, with effort, can understand it and indeed enjoy it. (There is in fact a large body of Modern English work based on Chaucer, including drama, radio and television material.)

In some cases where linguistic **detail** is in question (rather than generalities as just exemplified), researchers in other disciplines may have their analyses vitiated by errors on such points of detail. For instance, the parapsychologist and psychologist Anne Winsper has worked on Electronic Voice Phenomenon. EVP involves series of electronically generated noises which resemble speech in known or unknown languages but are not the result of intentional voice recordings or renderings. EVP was first reported in C19 and has been intensively studied since Konstantin Raudive's advocacy in the 1970s.

Skeptical linguists as well as other skeptics have studied EVP, although Winsper (who presents herself as an open-minded skeptic) dismisses the generally negative conclusions of this work as glib and prejudiced. For a skeptical-linguistic summary of the EVP issue, see Chapter 5 of my 2023 book *Strange Linguistics*.

Paranormalists who have worked on EVP and have concluded that it is genuine offer various explanations for it, mostly involving the 'spirit world'. Some believe that it at least sometimes involves communication with the dead, and Winsper focuses mainly on this notion, particularly in her talk 'Creating The Dead: Does Perception Belief Affect The Interpretation Of EVP?' (very useful on the facts of the history of EVP studies). This conception of EVP relates to other work on alleged communication

with the dead, which often involves the highly suspect alleged use by spirits of no-longer-current forms of the languages in question.

Unfortunately, Winsper makes a number of basic linguistic errors and omissions in her discussion:

1 Instead of referring to phones (speech-sounds), she uses the term *allophone*, which makes sense **only** where the membership of phones in the more abstract categories called *phonemes* is in question.

2 Winsper invokes but fails to explain the technical phonetic notion of a formant.

3 Where her discussion involves reversals, she fails to refer to the extensive discussion in the literature of alleged reversals in linguistic sequences, e.g. in 'backward masking' in rock music lyrics, in the Reverse Speech theory of David Oates, etc.

4. Winsper refers only in passing to the very relevant question of redundancy in linguistic sequences; the level of redundancy in speech is very high, often around 50%, which facilitates the identification of less-than-clear sequences (but such sequences may still be ambiguous).

5 Winsper provides a very inaccurate and confusing account of stress patterns and vowel qualities in English words. She seems to be assuming here - unjustifiably - that English is the main relevant language in context. But even for English her statements are often inaccurate. It is true that stressed ('strong') syllables in English generally have 'full' (unreduced) vowels. But by no means all lexical (dictionary) words **commence** with stressed syllables or with syllables with full vowels, as she suggests And, as she herself makes clear through her examples but does not actually state, many lexical words (e.g. *hold* and *yes*) have only **one** syllable. Grammatical words - which often have meanings of their own as well as 'linking' lexical words - **may** also have full vowels, although many of them are unstressed monosyllables and (like unstressed syllables in lexical words) often have schwa or other weak vowels. And Winsper's statement that *giraffe* (second syllable stress) is a grammatical word is ludicrous. (Did she really mean that?!' Winsper goes on to state that boundaries are often wrongly inserted in listening before stressed syllables and omitted before unstressed syllables. But some of her examples fail, especially where the original and the modified forms have the same numbers of syllables, often with errors as to the specific phonemes present. Winsper's main example of phonemic blending at word boundaries (*this shop*) is also inaccurate. And she does not distinguish clearly enough between contrasting cross-linguistic structures in otherwise similar expressions involving a) vowels with full values, b) reduced vowels such as schwa and c) the absence of any vowel. In sum, Winsper's entire discussion of these matters is confused and in places misleading.

Winsper's material is by no means without use, whether or not one accepts her anti-skeptical 'take' on EVP. She is well-informed on many matters and must be taken seriously. But even scholars of her calibre can make major errors when they are 'off their home turf'. And, obviously, those with no relevant scholarly background at all are very liable to be mistaken or worse.