



The Dominion Post
15/07/2009
Page: 5
Features
By: Laurie Bauer
Region: Wellington
Circulation: 94598
Type: NZ Metro
Size: 335.44 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTF--

Language must not become the tool of the bully



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

BULLYING seems never far from the headlines these days. And while I am not sure exactly how educationalists and others define bullying, I would propose a definition along the lines of “the use of physical, psychological or social force to attack a person’s sense of self-worth or to coerce someone into behaviour (usually of a type they don’t want to indulge in)”.

What, you might ask, has this got to do with language?

Well, one of the common findings of the field of first language acquisition is that, in general, children do not speak like their parents but like their peers. Thus, on the whole, children of British parents who grow up in New Zealand speak with a New Zealand accent, not a British one. While you may be able to think of some counter-examples, the general principle is well recognised. Why do they speak like their peers? There are probably two sides to this: the first is that they want to, because they want to be one of the gang; the second is that their peers demand it. Children who do not speak like their peers are mocked for this fact.

This is surely bullying, within the definition just provided. Interestingly, though, many have suggested that learning to speak like one’s peers has some evolutionary value.

One of the differences between humans and other apes is that humans are parts of larger social groups than other apes. So large, in fact, that it is not always possible to know every individual in the group. While in the social groups of other primates, a large amount of grooming takes place, various scholars have suggested that humans replace this grooming behaviour with linguistic behaviour, saying “Hello”, asking after people’s health, gossiping, and so on.

One of the functions of the group is to protect its own members. This might include sharing food with them. But in

the early days of humankind, if you were often sharing food, you had to beware of freeloaders, who could creep up in the dark, share your food, but not make any contribution to the group. So one theory goes that we use language to identify ourselves as members of the group, as people who can be fed, and we do this by speaking just like other members of the group.

So it may be, if you accept this theory, that bullying people to sound just like everyone else is something bred into us by evolution, and therefore not something that we are likely to be able to lose quickly.

Another kind of coercive linguistic behaviour also makes regular appearances in the news. This is where employers feel the urge to constrain the language used by workers, not when addressing customers, but when talking to each other and in some cases even in their free time.

Imagine that you had gone to live in Japan, and had learnt enough Japanese to work there; imagine furthermore that you knew some English-speaking people in your workplace. Would you prefer to talk to them in English or in Japanese? I would suggest that not only would English be less effort for you (and for them), but that it would be perceived as rude if you addressed them in Japanese. Of course, you would expect to address customers in your workplace in Japanese, but to talk to other Anglophones in Japanese would be extremely unnatural.

The same is true for overseas workers employed in New Zealand. Forcing them into speaking English when they are not working is using your superior power to make them act unnaturally. It is clearly a case of bullying. Those who don’t like bullies should consider their own behaviour in such circumstances.

If you criticised your workers on the grounds that they were women or homosexual, the law would look after your workers; if you criticised your workers because of their religion or their skin colour, the law would look after your workers.

Unfortunately, if you criticise them because they prefer to talk a language other than yours, the law says nothing. We must take care that language does not become the last refuge of the racist bully.

■ Laurie Bauer is a linguist at Victoria University. Email your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz