

Linguistics beyond bars

Giving lectures on linguistics to prisoners

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What I did

- > Collaboration with **University Beyond Bars** in Washington State to give lectures on linguistics to prisoners in Summer 2016
- > **Motivation**
 - > Prisoners make up an underserved community
 - > Contribute to education programs in prison
 - > Untapped institution for public scholarship



Setup

- > **University Beyond Bars** already affiliate with U of Washington
 - > **Law, Societies & Justice program**
 - > **Transformative Education Behind Bars consortium**
 - > Never had a linguistics lecture since est. 2005



2.5 hours

25–50 inmates

NO

Electronics
Computers
Projection
Spiral binding
Yellow markers

Lecture content

> “Introduction to linguistics” style survey of subfields, with language examples

Language component	Field of study	Example
Sounds	Phonetics	Tones, Clicks, PNW lgs
Word formation	Morphology	Blends, acronyms, WOTY
Sentence structure	Syntax	Word orders
Meanings	Semantics	Colors, idioms
Human	Sociolinguistics	Txtspeak, regional variation

1 SOUNDS / PHONETICS

CLICKS

Some languages have clicks in their sound inventory



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2 WORD FORMATION : MORPHOLOGY

ACRONYMS



NASA: National Aeronautics and Space Administration

CD: Compact Disk

SCUBA: Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus

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#1 WHAT DO YOU CALL THIS?



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DIALECT REGIONS OF THE USA

► Where do people speak differently?



Some questions I received

- *If languages are dying so quickly, are new ones being created?*
- *Do sign languages have phonetics?*
- *Is the prevalence of clicks in Africa related to its geography? (is Yoda from the Amazon?)*
- *What is a word? If agglutinating languages work like you say?*
- *Did the Australian aborigines develop language at the same time as Africans?*

Prisoners shared personal stories afterwards

- *I read all of Lord of the Rings and studied Finnish to better understand Tolkien's languages.*
- *I study Japanese on my free time, and the writing system(s) are so peculiar.*
- *I'm half-Korean, and I'm always made fun of because I don't speak Korean.*
- *I'm going to call my 92 y/o grandpa, the last relative in my family who speaks Hungarian.*
- *I read a lot of Hayakawa–Korzybski semantics, how does that differ from Chomsky's school of thought?*

Challenges

- > Initial access is probably difficult without org support
- > Background check took 6 months
- > Restrictions on materials
- > Setting awareness, cultural sensitivity, cautious humor etc.

Benefits

- > **Potential research topics.** Prison argot, prison sign language
- > **Improves communication skills.** Non-traditional audience, few presentational aids
- > **Education reduces recidivism.**

Stop prison fights with linguistics.

“Someone actually referenced your lecture yesterday during a dispute on a word's usage, saying that we shouldn't rely so much on dictionaries.”

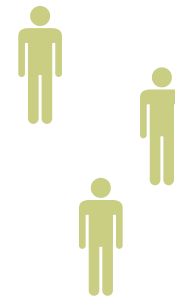
—Follow-up email from organizer



Moving Forward

- > Reach out to similar programs.
- > Engage with campus programs.

Prisoners who participate in prison education programs have **43%** lower odds of returning to prison than inmates who do not.



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