Introduction

Folk linguistics (FL) studies what people say and believe about language. Although there were many older examples of such work, the field was highly recommended by Henry Hoenigswald some years ago:

… we should be interested not only in (a) what goes on (language), but also in (b) how people react to what goes on (they are persuaded, they are put off, etc.) and in (c) what people say goes on (talk concerning language). It will not do to dismiss these secondary and tertiary modes of conduct merely as sources of error.

Hoenigswald, 1966: 20

Many would suggest that linguists are in fact more interested in what allows language to go on, i.e., the rules of production and comprehension and the mental states that hold them, but I will assume that Hoenigswald had such rules in mind when he indicated interest in “a”. His characterization of “b” seems, however, oddly limited to perlocutionary uptakes (“persuaded”, “put off”). Most modern sociolinguists would say that our reactions to what is said are not just such pragmatic achievements but also reactions to how something is said that are based on such speaker characteristics as region, age, status, ethnicity, sex, and others – in short, language attitudes. In fact, much of what is said and believed about language is surely based on the lifelong acquisition of such attitudes, and they will therefore form an important part of any characterization of FL. The following sections will review these foundational properties of FL and their relevance to other areas of linguistic science, with a special focus on their importance to Language Awareness (LA).
All nonlinguists are ‘folk’ as regards language. Folk are not quaint, uneducated, rural, brightly costumed, home-made instrument-strumming respondents who hunt and/or care for animals. The folk linguistics of corporate CEOs, rocket scientists, and brain surgeons is just as interesting as that of any other group. For example, the American Folklore Society at its “Folklore Wiki” site that defines the field has the following to say about a number of quoted definitions:

One thing you’ll note about these definitions and descriptions is that they challenge the notion of folklore as something that is simply “old,” “old-fashioned,” “exotic,” “rural,” “peasant,” “uneducated,” “untrue,” or “dying out.”

There are two basic epistemological states in FL:

1. Unavailable: Theoretical constructs concerning language and/or automatic processing components of language that are not open to nonacademically acquired knowledge by nonlinguists.

2. Available
   i) Correct: Beliefs about language by nonlinguists that correspond to what is known by linguists.
   ii) Incorrect: Beliefs about language by nonlinguists that do not correspond to what is known by linguists.

The sorts of linguistic objects that are available to the folk were first outlined in Silverstein (1981) and further investigated in Preston (1996a), with the addition of the types of awareness outlined here (i.e. availability [and accuracy], specificity, and reproducibility).

What people don’t know can’t be studied if overt knowledge is the subject matter, but as soon as linguistically accurate information becomes available to the conscious awareness of nonlinguists, they (at least for that particular information) lose their non-professional status and are no longer targets for FL study. This, however, is not exactly right; the world is certainly not cleanly divided into linguists and nonlinguists. Many ‘nonlinguists’ are ‘language professionals’, who admittedly have not had extensive theoretical training but nevertheless have some awareness of linguistic facts and even theoretical stances. It would be wrong for FL to ignore them. Because that is the case, the representation of such semi-professional knowledge will not always be in terms that are the most recent, most economical, most comprehensive, and most up-to-date so far as the linguistic community is concerned.

In fact, the idea that some ‘Available’ folk notions are ‘Incorrect’ should always be understood from a historical-theoretical perspective; what the nonlinguist believes at any given moment might later prove to be accurate; linguists either have not yet investigated it or have got it wrong. This point will be more thoroughly exemplified in the section below on the uses of FL.

The specificity of FL belief runs from detailed to global (or vague). A respondent may comment on what they perceive as a language peculiarity but can give no linguistically
satisfying example of what linguistic fact or facts characterize it. Niedzielski and Preston (2003) report on a respondent who says her uncles have a strong “Slavic or Germanic accent”, but she can neither mention nor imitate any feature of it.

The Evidence and Procedural Construction of FL

The external evidence of FL is most often expressed in *Metalanguage 1* (Preston, 2004): overt comment that has any aspect of language itself as the topic, although variety imitations or instances of folk humour also constitute such evidence. *Metalanguage 2*, any mention of language in language use, may be interesting to linguistic ethnographers but probably not extensively to FL. For example, “Mary whispered that she was about to leave” mentions the linguistic fact of whispering, but the sentence is not about language. *Metalanguage 3* events are characterized by their nonassertive and/or nonconscious character and are also interesting for the study of folk notions of language. For example, “What’s funny about Nathan’s dialect?” presupposes that there is a classification of language variety known as “dialect” (a label that may not exactly correspond to the semantics of the professional term) and that such varieties may exhibit the quality “funny” (Preston, 2004).

This last level of analysis is exactly the sort of indirect (or implicit) knowledge that is obviously not taken from overt comments about language, but it is such a rich source for the understanding of FL, particularly the organized fabric of attitudes and beliefs one seeks in language ideology, that it is impossible to ignore and is examined more carefully below.

I have referred to this more expanded view of beliefs, attitudes, and their organization or ideologies as *language regard* (e.g. Preston, 2010) and have tried to outline analytical approaches to such data (e.g. Niedzielski and Preston, 2003; Preston, 1994; Preston and Niedzielski, 2016). In traditional FL, however, there is only one cognitive level: the conscious, overt, working memory aspects of what nonlinguists know about language. This position is different from that taken in, for example, Preston 2010, in which nonconsciously triggered language attitudes, nonconsciously foregrounded presuppositions, and other such matters are included in FL. Since others will touch on many of these possibilities in this volume with regard to LA, a generally more conservative view of FL is taken here, but further discussion of this point is taken up in what follows.

The triggers (and etiology) of FL beliefs and reactions are complex. One good beginning explanation is provided by the Japanese sociolinguist Takesi Sibata: “It appears to be natural for forms which differ from those which one usually uses to attract one’s attention” (1971: 374). It is more complex of course. Figure 23.1 shows the triggers and pathways of a typical language regard event and at the same time the necessary components for such arousal.

At the top of the triangle is a language event (an “ɑ”, i.e., an instance of ‘Language production’). Let’s suppose it’s a sentence like “I hated high school”. Let’s also stipulate that the speaker’s pronunciation of “high” is monophthongal, i.e. [a:] not [ai]. Such a pronunciation will immediately cause a hearer from most of the United States to regard how the speaker has said what they have said, not just what they have said (the ‘Noticing’ or #1 step). That noticing will also trigger awareness that the speaker is from the US South, the ‘Classifying’ (or #2) step. That classification allows the hearer to ‘Imbue’ (step #3) the language performance with certain beliefs, shown at the bottom of the
triangle under ‘Language Regard Beliefs’, although this set of beliefs is as much about stereotypes of groups as it is about language itself. An even more complex set of directives (‘Cognitive states and processes…’) then guides the hearer to construct a response (#4) to this particular instance, whether that response is a case of an overt response to the trigger and processing (b) or a covert one, not available to conscious expression and retrieval (c).

What is down there in the ‘Language regard beliefs’ repository is a complex network of ideas, relations, and stereotypes, mostly about people, but here honed down to focus on those that have relevance to language. Their complexity often leads to apparent contradictions, but that is surely the case of most of our regard for human beings and their practices, including ourselves. Consider the following:

A few years ago, the Swedish Institute of Public Opinion Research asked young Swedes to describe their compatriots. The top eight adjectives they chose were: envious, stiff, industrious, nature loving, quiet, honest, dishonest, xenophobic

Booth, 2014, italics mine

In studies of regard for regional diversity conducted in the Midwestern Great Lakes area of the Northern US (Michigan), a study that asked respondents to rate areas of the US for language ‘correctness’ and ‘pleasantness’ (Preston, 1996b) found that these raters thought their own speech to be uniquely correct and very pleasant, and they also found the speech of the US South to be least correct (along with the metropolitan area

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Figure 23.1. A FL triangle of pathways, repositories and resulting events.
Source: Adapted from Niedzielski and Preston, 2003: xi.
of New York City) and not particularly pleasant. When similar respondents were asked to respond to a ‘silent’ matched guise (given only regional area sites as stimuli) that was based on detailed semantic differential pairs derived locally (e.g. slow–fast, polite–rude, smart–dumb, normal–abnormal, formal–casual, friendly–unfriendly, educated–uneducated, snobbish–down-to-earth, bad English–good English), the results were very different. They continued to rate themselves very high for the ‘status’ traits such as ‘educated’ and ‘good English’ but rated Southern speakers higher for such solidarity traits as ‘down-to-earth’ and ‘friendly’ (Preston, 1999). Although both tasks were clearly fully conscious ones, the change in methodological presentation (gross researcher defined labels as opposed to detailed locally elicited ones) produced sharply contrasting results.

In many cases, students of language attitudes have seemed to be on a quest for the ‘true’ or ‘real’ attitude, perhaps most recently expressed in the development of experimental designs fashioned to retrieve implicit attitudes. Even sociolinguists have suggested that there may be less variety in the social perception of language than in its performance.

Subjective correlates of change are more categorical in nature than the changing pattern of behavior: their investigation deepens our understanding of the ways in which discrete categorization is imposed on the continuous process of change.

\[\text{Weinreich et al., 1968: 186}\]

I believe, in contrast, that a great deal of research has shown that the social regard for language is complex and varied and that we learn more from studying that variation (and what triggers specific elements of it) rather than searching for the Holy Grail of a singular set of evaluations and beliefs. A model of the territory suggested by the ‘Language regard beliefs’ label of Figure 23.1 is outlined in Preston (2010) and updated in Preston (2011 and 2016).

The Uses of FL

FL is closely aligned with anthropological linguistics (the ethnography of speaking) and has contributed to enhanced understandings of linguistic behaviour:

If the community’s own theory of linguistic repertoire and speech is considered (as it must be in any serious ethnographic account), matters become all the more complex and interesting.

\[\text{Hymes, 1972: 39}\]

This confirmation of the value of FL has gained even more recent relevance in the development of the notion of language ideology, an obvious extension of Hymes’ desideratum. Rumsey’s definition is simple: linguistic ideologies are “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (1990: 346), but I believe this overlooks the fact that language ideology refers to coordinated, interlocked systems of belief and regard, not the individual instances so often studied in language attitude work by social psychologists. Irvine says it simply and best: language ideology is “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships” (1989: 255).

For example, a great deal of FL evidence from work done in the US points to an ideological belief in a cognitively exterior existence of language itself, that is, a locating...
of language outside the mental construct normally represented by linguists. Consider the following exchange:

((In a discussion of Christmas customs, H (the fieldworker, not a native speaker of English) has asked if there is any difference between gift and present; D has said earlier that there is not, but he returns to the question.))

D: Oftentimes a gift is something like you you go to a Tupperware party and they’re going to give you a gift, it’s- I think it’s more =

H: Uh huh.
D:= impersonal, – than a present.

G: No, there’s no difference.

D: No? There’s real- yeah there’s really no difference. That’s true. Maybe the way we use it is though.

G: There is no difference.
U: Maybe we could look it up and see what ‘gift’ means.

D: I mean technically there’s no difference.
((They look up gift and present in the dictionary.))

Niedzielski and Preston, 2003: 313

For linguists, the idea that “the way we use it” does not constitute a “real” or “technical” difference would be amazing. At first one might be tempted to say that this interchange illustrates the “standard language ideology” (Milroy and Milroy, 1999), but on closer inspection it may reveal a more striking ideological contrast with the standard linguistic opinion.

Rumsey’s (1990) study of Ungarinyin (a language in northwestern Australia) may help make this clear. He notes that English contrasts reported speech as either direct (“He said ‘I want a beer’”) or indirect (“He said he wanted a beer”). Ungarinyin cannot use indirect reported speech, which Rumsey suggests is possible only due to the Western folk linguistic belief that language and its use are not one and the same. In work on US folk linguistics, it does seem that language is thought to be separate from use. Let me represent that folk belief graphically and contrast it with a linguist’s idea of language (Figure 23.2).

In US ideology, language is an ideal fact, superordinate to use, and the only usage which derives directly from this ideal is ‘good language’, connecting this more philosophically oriented ideology to that of the standard language ideology mentioned above. Everything else is a deviation from what the language should be, as shown in the top half of Figure 23.2. Linguists, on the other hand, believe that a language is a very abstract notion. ‘English’ is only a label for all the varieties that constitute it.

The determination of ideological systems, however, does not consist in looking carefully only at those data that appear on the surface in talk about talk.
... [S]ome of the most important and interesting aspects of ideology lie behind the scenes, in assumptions that are taken for granted – that are never explicitly stated in any format that would permit them also to be explicitly denied. As Silverstein (1979 and elsewhere) has suggested, the best place to look for language ideology may lie in the terms and presuppositions of metapragmatic discourse, not just in its assertions. *Irvine, 2001: 25*

Consider very briefly the following exchange between a linguistically trained Taiwanese fieldworker (C) and an African-American male respondent:

1 C: We uh – linguistics, in this field, uh – from the book I s- I mean, I saw from the book that – many linguists quite interest in Black English. So could you tell me – a little bit about – your dialect?
2 D: Dialects.
3 C: Heh yeah
4 All: ((laughter))
5 D: Well, uh: – well – see the world’s getting smaller.=
6 C: ((laughs)) I- I mea- do you have-
This short interview passage is rife with presuppositions. In 1C, for example, the interviewer makes use of the existential presupposition that “dialects” exist and, with the phrase “your dialect”, that you have one. The intonation in 2D makes it clear that D is not so sure, and in 5D (and continuing) makes use of a comparative presupposition (the world used to be bigger), itself embedded in a metaphor (The world is getting smaller; things are not as different as they used to be), made explicit in his assertion that there are fewer dialects nowadays. The implicative presupposition “happen” in “I … happen not to be from the South”, however, suggests that this is bad luck for C (otherwise the sentence is hardly relevant), and the ultimate conclusion must be that dialects, although dying elsewhere, are still there in the South, a commonly held folk belief in the US that the South is the most distinctly ‘dialectal’ speech.

This principled pragmatic approach to the overt and presupposed content of FL interviews opens up new opportunities for the interpretation and understanding of folk talk about talk and further illustrates the relationship between FL and the ethnography of speaking and language.

FL has even provided clues to linguists for the study of general and theoretical matters. For example, Plichta (2004) noted that FL commentary in much of the US identified Inland Northern (i.e. the urban Great Lakes area of the US) pronunciation as ‘nasal’. Linguists usually suggest that nonphonemic or nonenvironmentally conditioned nasality is most likely a personal rather than regional matter. Plichta’s acoustic investigation of vowels involved in the Northern Cities Chain Shift, a rotation of the lax vowels in that area, however, showed that a strong nasal formant (even in non-nasal environments) accompanied the repositioning of these vowels, and this has redirected our study of speech in the area. Perhaps there are a host of such folk-held beliefs that could point linguists in the right direction.

Research on language variation and change clearly benefits from the determination of FL beliefs since they are integral parts of the foundational attitudes of a speech community or community of practice, and any research that depends on a deeper understanding of the community will need FL information as much as it needs any other socio-demographic or linguistic characterization. It is difficult to imagine not wanting to know what members of a speech community believe about those very linguistic phenomena that are under investigation in any study of variation and change. In fact, the distinction between “change from above” (conscious) and “change from below” (non-conscious) (Labov, 1994: 78) could be characterized in FL terms and seminal work in variation and change directly refers to matters of obvious FL interest:

The theory of language change must establish empirically the subjective correlates of the several layers and variables in a heterogeneous structure. Such subjective correlates of evaluations cannot be deduced from the place of the variables within linguistic structure. Furthermore, the level of social awareness is a major property of linguistic change which must be determined directly. Subjective correlates of
In work on the Northern Cities Chain Shift vowel system, referred to above, Niedzielski (1997) showed that respondents from southeastern Michigan, themselves all shifted, had odd difficulties in perceiving local vowels. She told respondents she was from a telephone company and was investigating how well people could hear differences. She told them (crucially) that they were to hear the voice of a Michigan speaker. They all heard the word ‘last’ pronounced with considerable raising and fronting, putting it well within the normal acoustic range for the vowel in ‘lest’ rather than ‘last’. She then asked them to associate the first pronunciation with three others and to match the first with the one from those three that was the same. The three included 1) the same pronunciation, 2) a pronunciation in more typical low-front territory (i.e. [æ]) and 3) an even lower and backer vowel ([a]). Of the 42 respondents, none got it right, and two even matched the shifted performance with the lower and backer version. How could these respondents be so wrong?

Recall that work with similar respondents in Michigan revealed that they believe they are the most correct speakers of English in the US (Niedzielski and Preston, 2003; Preston, 1996b). When Niedzielski asked them to match a local voice (and told them it was local), she triggered in them the idea that the speaker they first heard was a standard user of English. When they next heard the three alternatives for matching, they paid less attention to the acoustic properties of the vowel than they did to the search for the most ‘standard-sounding’ one. Varieties around them from personal contact and in the media as well as older varieties in their own locale make this alternative system available to them, and they, in fact, believe it is the system they use themselves. In fact, when told about the Northern Cities Shift vowel system, Michigan residents are in denial that any such change is going on. Over the years, I have called such phenomena “your brain getting in the way of your ear”.

The upshot for language variation and change as it is related to FL and language regard is straightforward. These believers in the correctness of local speech would not have allowed linguistic change to happen since they already had a perfect system. The sound of the new system was, therefore, repressed, and their awareness of the emerging system was thwarted by this belief in the local standard. Without knowledge of this FL fact, it is difficult to understand how rapid and dramatic change could have taken place in an area of such great linguistic security.

FL also supplements, contrasts, and offers explanatory backgrounds to both qualitative and experimental work in the social psychology of language or ‘language attitudes’. For example, Preston (1989: 3) criticized a great deal of traditional matched-guise language attitude work that focused on regional pronunciation since no FL of the region in question (the perceptual dialectology) had been done to determine if respondents even considered the area labelled by the investigators to be a speech region. If, for example, East Hessian respondents rate a Westphalian voice as ‘ugly’ or ‘soothing’ but do not even regard Westphalia as a dialect region of Germany (as Purschke, 2010: 157 shows they do not), what has the research discovered?

A most compelling use of FL to contrast more traditional matched-guise work has been done in the study of attitudes to varieties in Denmark. Kristiansen (2009, and see
his chapter in this volume) first asked respondents from around Denmark to name the variety they liked best. The respondents overwhelmingly picked their own. When they listened to varieties in a traditional matched-guise test, however, they not only preferred ‘Modern Copenhagen’ speech over ‘Standard Danish’ and their own local varieties, they also preferred it for the very features that one would associate with ‘likeability’, e.g. ‘cool’, ‘nice’, ‘trustworthy’, ‘fascinating’. This substantiates the fact mentioned above that language regard is variable and that different settings and tasks will tease out different characteristics, but in this case the contrast between the overt FL knowledge and the implicit responses pointed the way to an interesting correspondence. Danish, all over the country, is in fact moving in the direction of ‘Modern Copenhagen’ speech, and it was that variety that was preferred in the matched guise format but not in the overt FL responses.

Finally, FL is essential to applied linguistics. Work on ‘language problems’ cannot be effectively done without an understanding of the often strongly held FL beliefs in the affected community. One obvious application is to language teaching and learning issues. What people believe about how they learn language, how difficult a target language is, what particular talents they believe they have or lack in learning a second language, and what the social outcomes of learning are will aid those who design curricula, train teachers, write textbooks, etc… to adapt to or at least reflect an understanding of folk conceptions of language learning processes and outcomes (e.g. Pasquale and Preston, 2013). Other applied FL subfields are just beginning to be noticed (e.g. language policy and planning in Albury, 2014), and a survey of the breadth of the potential is available in the AILA Review (#24, 2010).

LA

Since I am not a LA practitioner, I copy here the official description from the organization’s website (under ‘About’):

We define Language Awareness as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use. (Bold in the original.)

It covers a wide spectrum of fields. For example, Language Awareness issues include exploring the benefits that can be derived from developing a good knowledge about language, a conscious understanding of how languages work, of how people learn them and use them.

LA apparently wants nonlinguists to become linguist-like (or ‘linguists lite’). This is most obvious in the phrases “good knowledge” taken from the organizational website cited above, for I assume such phrases refer to the sorts of information linguists have and nonlinguists don’t.

I am most intrigued, however, by the association’s website assertion that “Language Awareness interests also include learning more about what sorts of ideas about language people normally operate with, and what effects these have on how they conduct their everyday affairs; e.g. their professional dealings”. In short, LA recognizes the importance of FL in dealing with language among nonlinguists. The reasoning behind this, one supposes, is that the strongly held folk beliefs about language will be difficult
to turn in another direction unless they are known. In this respect, the applied aims of FL and this part of LA's goals are in complete agreement.

The major difference, so far as I can see, is that LA is wedded to a theory of learning that suggests that conscious knowledge of language facts will improve or enhance learners and users. FL, although it purports to be of importance to all areas of applied linguistics, does not suggest any such learning theory proposition.

Interestingly, exactly as FL has moved in the direction of considering implicit as well as explicit knowledge about language, in its most recent conference, there was discussion among the Association for Language Awareness members that their website might emphasize too much the study and manipulation of only conscious or overt knowledge in its approach.

Perhaps the parentage of the two areas of action and investigation account for their differences. FL grows out of a research interest most directly fostered by ethnographic, sociolinguistic, and social psychological motivations, although its belief in its importance to applied linguistics is long-standing. In contrast, LA comes rather directly from applied linguistic motivations, at first those that touched primarily on adult second and foreign language learning, but it too has more recently cast a much wider net. That part of LA that wants to know the FL of the people it seeks to serve should make it clear that the shared interests of FL and LA point to a future of cooperation and even collaboration.

Related Topics
Language variation; language change; language ideology; language attitudes

Note
1 The transcription conventions used in the conversation excerpts in this chapter are generally those devised by Gail Jefferson, as outlined for example in Schenkein (1978).

References


