

Linguistics beyond bars: Giving lectures on linguistics to prisoners

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Overview

- **Collaboration.** I collaborated with **University Beyond Bars**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit in Washington State, to give lectures on linguistics to prisoners in Summer 2016
- **Motivation.**
 - Prisoners make up an under-served community and protected population.
 - Contribute to education programs in prison.
- **Untapped institution for public scholarship.**

Setup

UBB was the main point of contact

- Organizes education programs for a prison in northwest Washington
- Official collaborator with **Law, Societies & Justice program** and **Transformative Education Behind Bars (TEBB) consortium** at UW
- Typically organizes recurring classes on English composition, programming, general Humanities, and math
- Never had a linguistics lecture since its establishment in 2005
- Set up 1 lecture, then was invited back for more



Prohibited materials

- All electronics. No computers, no USB, no projection.
- CDs are fine. But DVDs must be screened
- No spiral binding
- No yellow markers

UBB is the first post-secondary experience for **69%** of the students.

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



2.5 hours	25–50 inmates	NO electronics
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Audience.

- Minimum Security Unit: ~25 inmates
- Medium Security Unity: ~50 inmates, security personnel
- Prisoners are sometimes assigned to take Department of Corrections programs, but this is voluntary.

Lecture content.

- “Introduction to linguistics” traditional survey of subfields, with language examples that epitomize the subfield
- Periodically bells would ring signaling “moving period” and some would leave or enter

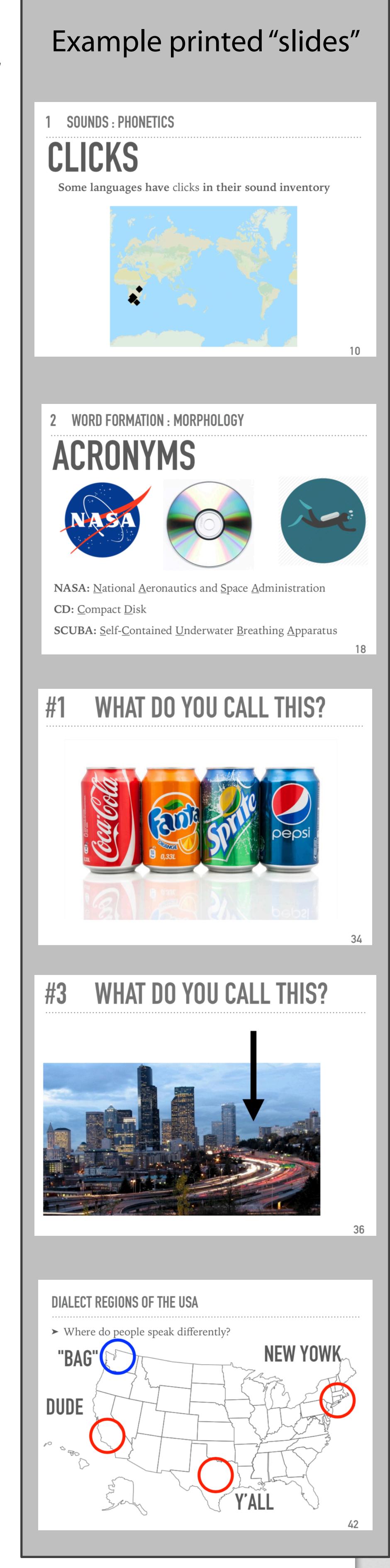
Some questions I received.

- 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?

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?

Lectures



Challenges

- **Initial access.** Time from initial contact, through background check, through materials approval, to lectures = 6 months
- **Restrictions on materials.** Completely analog presentation.
- **Cultural sensitivity.** Be aware of your audience and choose references and humor carefully.

Benefits

- **Potential research topics.** The community uses prison argot and prison sign language. There is a gap in research done on language use in prisons (Bentley & Corbett 1992, Einat & Einat 2000).
- **Improves communication skills.** Educators used to the typical class or conference audience are forced to adjust their communication styles to a new audience, with few presentation aids.
- **Education reduces recidivism.** Studies have consistently shown that education, and higher education in particular, reduces recidivism (Davis 2013).

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.** Point of contact organizations will solve logistics.
- **Engage with campus programs.** Law schools or departments may have established programs.

References

- Bentley, William K. and James M. Corbett. 1992. *Prison Slang: Words and Expressions Depicting Life Behind Bars*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.
Davis, Lois M.; Robert Bozick; Jennifer L. Steele; Jessica Saunders; and Jeremy N.V. Miles. 2013. *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs that Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. RAND Corporation.
Einat, Tomer; and Haim Einat. 2000. Inmate Argot as an expression of prison subculture: the Israeli case. *The Prison Journal* 80(3):309–325.
UBB. University Beyond Bars website. <<http://www.universitybeyondbars.org/>> Accessed Dec 2017.