"Why didn't anyone tell me this before?"

Subversive Linguistics in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Every linguist has heard a student ask this question, usually after they finally come to understand how something *really* works in English. It's a gratifying experience, for both student and teacher; but it's equally frustrating. Because they **should** have been told. And they weren't.

40 years ago when I started teaching linguistics, this used to happen in graduate courses. Now it's most common in undergraduate courses. That's good; but our real task for the next century is to push American linguistic education all the way down to the K-12 level, where it belongs.

There's nothing in an Intro Ling class that can't be taught in high school; in fact, a great deal of Intro Ling class content can be taught profitably to grade-schoolers. However, there is no realistic hope of linguistics ever becoming part of the American primary or secondary curriculum – and even if it did, it would be ignored, like everything else. Because students know that school is **boring**. And they're right.

However, another common experience Intro Ling students get is recognizing that linguistics problems are **fun**. Fun to look at, fun to show people, fun to try to solve, fun to try to pronounce, fun to brag on. Properly presented – as puzzles, challenges, competitions, patterns, semantic Sudoku, *weird shit* – most kids like linguistics problems, and geeks – who are our natural audience – **adore** them.

Fun is simply a better marketing strategy for repeat business, and provides many other benefits. Forget schools – in this lecture I suggest how to proceed: get students to pick it up on the street. That strategy has often worked before.

Associated (beta) Web page:
  http://www.umich.edu/~jlawler/AdHocPuzzles.html