“Why didn’t anyone tell me this before?”
Subversive Linguistics in the 21st Century

Prof. John Lawler, Linguistics
University of Michigan (Emeritus)
LANG 319, University of North Texas, Denton
5 pm Thurs April 12, 2012

Sponsored by the UNT Dept of Linguistics and Technical Communication

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