Style and Substance:

Restructuring the English Discipline to Incorporate Linguistics

As my academic journey with a major in English and a minor in Linguistics draws to a close, I am struck by how much the experience has fundamentally changed my perspective on language. Language holds a power invisible to most who use it. Our words are steeped in history, implications, and assumptions. Illuminating the hidden elements of language serves to empower its users and educate its receivers – two roles which we all simultaneously play. It is for these reasons that I believe it is necessary to incorporate Linguistics into English education beginning at a compulsory education level in order to combat harmful linguistic prejudices.

First, I will begin by outlining some common linguistic prejudices that occur within the broad realm of American English. Beginning at a young age, children are taught to write – and, implicitly, to speak - in a style commonly referred to as Standard American English (also known as SAE). 'Standard' American English, however, proves to be anything other than what its name suggests; its rules are notoriously wrought with academic controversy (Pantos, slide 18). As I will discuss later, this type of English is more easily categorized by what it is *not* rather than what it *is*.

The lessons that children receive are notoriously prescriptivist: they are implicitly taught that there is a correct way and an incorrect way to use language. These lessons sometimes even involve the shaming of an 'incorrect' child; consider the age-old restroom-request choral response, *I don't know, can you?* I believe that this kind of prescriptivist signaling builds a basis for language as a means to negatively assess and differentiate peers.

Perhaps the most systemic victims of linguistic prejudice are speakers of Black Language. This speech has been described in many ways; along my specific academic path, I had primarily heard it referred to as 'African American Vernacular English'. It was not until I encountered academic and activist Dr. April Baker-Bell's work that I heard the term 'Black Language'. As this analysis is largely inspired by Dr. Baker-Bell's piece *Linguistic Justice*, I will continue to exclusively use the phrase Black Language. She explains the significance of the term, saying:

> [Using the term 'Black Language'] acknowledge[s] Africologists' theories that maintain that Black speech is the continuation of African in an American context. Africologists argue that Black Language is a language in its own right that includes features of West African Languages, and it is not just a set of deviations from the English Language (Baker-Bell 3).

Furthermore, Baker-Bell argues that Standard American English is better described by Alim & Smitherman's term 'White Mainstream English'. This term reflects the biases inherent in the expectations of Standard American English, and it makes pointed reference to the racialized way that linguistic prejudices are disguised in a standardized language ideology. The language of the most socioeconomically privileged people in this country – that is, upper-middle class to upper-class white men – is innately considered the default version of American English, (Baker-Bell 3-4). As a result, speech which reflects a deflection from this 'norm' is systemically othered. In recognition of this process, I will also follow Baker-Bell's terminology regarding White Mainstream English throughout this piece.

Another significant group of speakers who experience linguistic prejudice in the United States – and especially within American education systems - are those who speak English as a second language (also known as ESL speakers). According to the National Center for Education Statistics' most recent findings, approximately ten percent of all public school children in the United States are actively acquiring and learning the English language while attending school (U.S. Department of Education). Double that amount, and you have the number of children who sometimes or always speak a language other than English within their own home (MacGregor-Mendoza 109). Professor of Spanish and Linguistics Dr. Patricia MacGregor-Mendoza has studied the experiences of students undergoing the acquisition process, and she reports widespread discriminatory practices for these ESL students:

> [Some students] were pushed to speak only English in school and [were] physically, verbally, or emotionally punished for speaking Spanish. . . [I]nformants reported that the negative experiences they had as young children shaped their overall academic achievement, their self-esteem as adults, and their beliefs regarding the language they should speak to their own children. Moreover, several informants reported being trained to think they were "stupid" because their teachers viewed their Spanish speaking background as a hindrance to their education (111).

Government-mandated services for these children are only a recent development; unsurprisingly, they still remain under-supported in the public school system. Their teachers are undereducated about the process of language acquisition, and they often consider these children "linguistically and (sometimes) intellectually deficient" (Ann and Peng 72-72). This detail is important to

remember when we consider the influences that teacher biases have upon their students, which I will discuss later in this piece.

As Baker-Bell's work with young Black charter school students demonstrates, the hegemony of White Mainstream English fosters negative self-image in those who do not naturally abide by it (60). While her research focuses on Black Language speakers who are expected to code-switch to White Mainstream English, I think we can reasonably extend those consequences to the broad range of speakers whose speech is not white enough, not male enough, and not affluent enough to meet societal expectations. How can we disrupt this hegemonic language system? In my view, early and ongoing linguistic education is the only answer.

Children acquire language at a miraculous rate. Even within the first hours of a child's life, the building blocks of language begin to assemble (Santhanam 1). As infants, we develop an ear specifically attuned to the sounds of our caregivers' language. Within just one year, our brains undergo 'perceptual narrowing' to specifically direct our focus toward the speech sounds -linguistically referred to as phonemes - of our native language. As a result, those speech sounds that we hear within the first twelve months are the only ones that we will inherently know for the rest of our lives. New speech sounds will have to be practiced and learned, and identifying or producing them will never come as naturally (Santhanam 3). Between three and six years old, our knowledge of language continues its rapid expansion. We begin to develop the ability to share our experiences with others in increasingly complex ways (Pence Turnbull and Justice 202-203). This time of exponential linguistic growth merits cultivation and encouragement .

The first step in toppling White Mainstream English from its pedestal is to educate our educators. School teachers are, by and large, underprepared for the language-based needs of their students (Moats 387). Most of them are not informed on the complexities of speech and language acquisition. For example, an educational services project found that most of the surveyed educators struggled with concepts that involved tracking speech to print and vice versa (Moats 388). Some dialects offer a variance between phonological and orthographical that does not match the patterns of White Mainstream English. In a piece that dissects how the American education system continually misjudges Black students and Black Language, Dr. John Rickford makes the following point:

> AAVE speakers who read 'I missed him' as 'I miss him' should not automatically be assumed to have misread, in the sense of not being able to decode the letters. On the contrary, they may have decoded the meaning of this Standard English sentence correctly, but they may then have reproduced its meaning according to the pronunciation letters of their dialect, in which a consonant cluster like [st] – the final sounds in *missed* – is often simplified to [s] (27).

Let us continue with this hypothetical scenario. Imagine, then, that a teacher fixates on a Black student's tendency to delete these consonant clusters. He interrupts the student in class to 'correct' her pronunciation. If the student protests (say, "That's what I meant," or, "I know"), perhaps the teacher deems her difficult or dishonest. If she continues the pattern of deletion, he assumes that she lacks reading comprehension. If the student accepts the 'correction', the teacher has sown another seed to reinforce the expectation for the Black student to code-switch. Furthermore, these 'corrections' will almost certainly be noted by the room full of her

classmates. Those who do not speak Black Language will observe that her speech is different, and the teacher's correction implies that her speech is 'wrong'.

Undereducated teachers also face numerous challenges in supporting ESL students. Without foreknowledge of the perceptual narrowing process, they may not understand or empathize with the struggle a child experiences when acquiring new phonemes. An educator may misjudge fluent but accented speech as imperfect acquisition.

Additionally useful for assisting ESL children is the linguistic branch of pragmatics. Learning how people use their languages in different ways can help outline cultural differences. This is especially important to consider in the education of ESL students. "Politeness strategies", for example, vary greatly across languages and cultures, and linguistic features like idioms or indirect speech acts (e.g. saying "It's cold in here!" rather than "Close the door!") do not easily translate (Lee 25). Linguistics scholar Dr. Jin Sook Lee explains that invisible cultural lines are drawn all across our speech, and asserts, "[T]eachers need to develop an awareness of such strategies and cues to better understand the intentions of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds" (23). Without an informed perspective on the building blocks of linguistics, a teacher may perceive an ESL speaker as rude if they use different markers of politeness, or 'dim-witted' if the student is often confused by the teacher's use of these cultural cues. These judgements, once again, will likely make an impression on the ESL student's classmates.

Prejudice emerges in children as young as three, and it tends to peak between the ages of four and seven (Priest et al. 809). As Baker-Bell points out, many linguistic differences must be considered in conjunction with racial and ethnic identities; they are inextricable qualities that

necessitate an intersectional contemplation (16). To consider the development of linguistic discrimination, then, we should consider the ways that racial and ethnic prejudices are cultivated in schoolchildren.

Numerous studies have been conducted to observe the effects of teachers' behavior on their classes' attitudes about discrimination. Children reportedly notice favorable or unfavorable treatment correlated with race or ethnicity, not only for themselves, but for other students as well. Furthermore, as students' social cognition improves, they learn to extrapolate these educators' behaviors and build biases based on their inferred judgements (Priest et al. 811). Evidently, the role that a teacher plays in modeling prejudicial behavior is significant.

One our educators are armed with linguistic knowledge, then, what is the best way to support and empower their students with that same information? In *Linguistic Justice*, Baker-Bell implements her Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy in classrooms primarily composed of Black students in Detroit. In this passage, she describes the aim of this pedagogy:

> [It provides a] framework that explicitly names and richly captures the type of linguistic oppression that is uniquely experienced and endured by Black Language-speakers. . . [This entailed] seven critical inquiry-based learning experiences that provided Black students with an opportunity to learn Black Language, learn through Black Language, and learn about Black Language while simultaneously working toward dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism (8).

Baker-Bell leads discussions that focus on the differences between listener reactions to Black Language versus White Mainstream English, and she encourages her students to consider the assumptions that they make about these languages (43). Students even share personal

experiences of being judged for using Black Language (Baker-Bell 51-53). Baker-Bell's instruction focuses on illuminating the unique grammatical functions of Black Language that cannot be analogously achieved through White Mainstream English (74), and she details the complex historical background that has built a foundation for modern-day Black Language (65). Additionally, students study works by Black authors and media with Black speakers, and they pay specific attention to the language used (82-84). After completing the curriculum, Baker-Bell surveys her students to see how their perceptions of Black Language have changed.

By and large, Baker-Bell's Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy helped her students interrogate their own internalized linguistic prejudices. Furthermore, it provided an education that acknowledged and celebrated the students' racial identities and linguistic backgrounds rather than enforcing an implicit expectation of assimilation or code-switching (100). However, Baker-Bell does recognize that her pedagogy in this implementation has its limitations. In *Linguistic Justice*, her research focuses on Black students attending a mostly Black school in a metropolitan area. When considering how to forward her work, Baker-Bell says the following:

> These critical capacities [taught in the Antiracist Black Language Pedagogy] are just as important – if not more important – for white students as they are for Black students and other students of color, as white students are more likely to perpetuate Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and uphold white linguistic hegemony by way of their privilege, power, and lack of awareness of language varieties other than their own (100).

For some context as I move forward, I am a white, middle-class woman who grew up in a rural Wisconsin town of less than five thousand people; when I started elementary school, over 98%

of the village population was white. My graduating class was just over 120 students, and most of us had spent our entire academic career within the same school district.

When I read Baker-Bell's *Linguistic Justice*, I was struck by the impact the lessons had on her students. I also learned so much about Black Language. I had never been taught, for instance, about the way that enslaved Africans were separated by the languages that they spoke in order to further isolate them and that they overlaid their own languages on top of English - the language of their oppressors - in order to build a communicative bridge (Baker-Bell 65). I wished that I had received that kind of education when I was younger, but I also considered how out-of-place Black Language lessons would have seemed in my almost all-white school, being taught by my all-white teachers.

For these reasons, I would suggest extending and adapting Baker-Bell's methods in a way that cultivates a broad linguistic perspective. This would involve implementing a curriculum that really encourages children to examine their own linguistic patterns. Like Baker-Bell, teachers could ask their students if they have ever been judged for the way that they speak, and they could also ask if they have ever judged the speech of others. Teachers could chart students' ideas of "correct" versus "incorrect" English and create individualized lessons that encourage a descriptivist approach of the varieties that students describe.

I would suggest these lessons involve a discussion of the 'Founder Effect', a term which describes "[t]he durable imprint of language structures brought to an area by the earliest groups of people forging a new society in the region" (Wolfram and Schilling 29). I would also encourage a conversation about how the very term 'Founder Effect' obscures the violent

subjugation and oppression of indigenous peoples and their languages; exploring this idea encourages the students to consider how biases can exist even within academic language.

Following settlement pattern dialect maps, students would be encouraged to trace their own linguistic idiosyncrasies to settlement patterns in order to contextualize local dialects. A classroom in the area that I grew up, for example, could examine the pronunciation of *bag* or *bagel* as *bay-g* or *baggle* and consider the potential linguistic heritage of those dialectical features. This curriculum would also lend itself to a post-colonial instruction. Dialect maps of indigenous languages as they existed pre-colonization could be overlaid with these settlement pattern maps, and students could be challenged to find indigenous words from the area still in use. This discussion of eradicated language and how it relates to the country's history of subjugating people of color, then, could lead to lessons that follow Baker-Bell's methods of dissecting Black Language structure and the histories behind it. Each of these different dialect and language discussions could be paired with media that demonstrates the speech styles from each unit.

It is my belief that a broader approach to linguistics that mimics Baker-Bell's would yield similar results to those that occur in her own work. By and large, her students developed a consciousness – specifically, a Black Linguistic Consciousness (Baker-Bell 93) – that enabled them to observe and combat the implicit prejudices of White Mainstream English's linguistic hegemony. I think this same kind of linguistic consciousness could be developed through the program I have described. Illuminating personal regional and cultural affectations will lead to a more widespread acceptance of others' affectations; exposing the framework of our ways of speaking cultivates an appreciation for the foundational history.

In conclusion, it is time to restructure the English discipline. The widespread prescriptivist approach to English elevates White Mainstream English and enforces white linguistic hegemony. In order to combat the prejudices that arise from this dominance, we must incorporate Linguistics into our compulsory English education.

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