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Should Writers Use They Own English?

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Vershawn Ashanti Young: Should Writer’s Use They Own English?

What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like? [...] First, you must clear your mind of [the following...]: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.”

--Stanley Fish, “What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3.”

Cultural critic Stanley Fish come talkin bout—in his three-piece *New York Times* “What Should Colleges Teach?” suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should “clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world” (“Part 3”). He say dont no student have a rite to they own language if that language make them “vulnerable to prejudice”; that “it may be true that the standard language is [...] a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students” (Fish “Part 3”).

Lord, lord, lord! Where do I begin, cuz this man sho tryin to take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan be talkin explicitly bout language differences. The two be intertwined. Used to be a time when a black person could get hanged from the nearest tree just cuz they be black. And they fingers and heads (double entendre intended) get chopped off sometimes. Stanley Fish say he be appalled at blatant prejudice, and get even madder at prejudice exhibited by those who claim it dont happen no mo (Fish “Henry Louis Gates”). And it do happen—as he know—when folks dont get no jobs or get fired or whatever cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Appalachian accent or sound like whatever aint the status quo. And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come saying that people make theyselves targets for racism if and when they dont write and speak like he do.

But dont nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them “vulnerable to prejudice.” It’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. Like the way some view, say, black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language, like what Fish expressed in his *NYT* blog, that make it so.

This explain why so many bloggers on Fish's *NYT* comment page was tryin to school him on why teachin one correct way lend a hand to choppin off folks' tongues. But, let me be fair to my man Stan. He prolly unaware that he be supportin language discrimination, cuz he appeal to its acceptable form—standard language ideology also called “dominant language ideology” (Lippi-Green). Standard language ideology is the belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively. Dominant language ideology also say peeps can speak whateva the heck way they want to—BUT AT HOME!

Dont get me wrong, Fish aint all wrong. One of his points almost on da money—the one when he say teachers of writin courses need to spend a lot of time dealin straight with writin, not only with topics of war, gender, race, and peace. But he dont like no black English and Native American rhetoric mixing with standard English. Yeah, he tell teachers to fake like students have language rites. He say,

If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, “I have a right to my own language,” reply, “Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I’m here to teach you another one.” (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it. (Fish “Part 3”)

Besides encouraging teachers to be snide and patronizing, Fish flat out confusin (I would say he lyin, but Momma say be nice). You cant start off sayin, “disabuse yo’self of the notion that students have a right to they dialect” and then say to tell students: “Y’all do have a right.” That be hypocritical. It further disingenuous of Fish to ask: “Who could object to learning a second language?” What he really mean by this rhetorical question is that the “multiculturals” should be thrilled to leave they own dialect and learn another one, the one he promote. If he meant everybody should be thrilled to learn another dialect, then wouldnt everybody be learnin everybody’s dialect? Wouldnt we all become multidialectal and pluralilingual? And that’s my exact argument, that we all should know everybody’s dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix of them in oral and written communication (Young).

See, dont nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression. Everybody mix the dialect they learn at home with whateva other dialect or language they learn afterwards. That’s how we understand accents; that’s how we can hear that some people are from a Polish, Spanish, or French language background when they speak English. It’s how we can tell somebody is from the South, from Appalachia, from Chicago or any other regional background. We hear that background in they speech, and it’s often expressed in they writin too. It’s natural (Coleman).

But some would say, “You cant mix no dialects at work; how would peeps who aint from yo hood understand you?” They say, “You just gotta use standard English.” Yet, even folks with good jobs in the corporate world dont follow no standard English. Check this out: Reporter Sam Dillon write about a survey conducted by the National Commission on Writing in 2004. He say “that a third of employees in

the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as \$3.1 billion annually on remedial training" (A23).

Now, some peeps gone say this illustrate how Fish be rite, why we need to be teachin mo standard grammar and stuff. If you look at it from Fish view, yeah it mean that. But if you look at it from my view, it most certainly dont mean that. Instead, it mean that the one set of rules that people be applyin to everybody's dialects leads to perceptions that writers need "remedial training" or that speakers of dialects are dumb. Teachin speakin and writin prescriptively, as Fish want, force people into patterns of language that aint natural or easy to understand. A whole lot of folk could be writin and speakin real, real smart if Fish and others stop using one prescriptive, foot-long ruler to measure the language of peeps who use a yard stick when they communicate.

Instead of prescribing how folks should write or speak, I say we teach language descriptively. This mean we should, for instance, teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously. We should teach how to let dialects comingle, sho nuff blend together, like blending the dialect Fish speak and the black vernacular that, say, a lot—certainly not all—black people speak.

See, people be mo pluralingual than we wanna recognize. What we need to do is enlarge our perspective about what good writin is and how good writin can look at work, at home, and at school. The narrow, prescriptive lens be messin writers and readers all the way up, cuz we all been taught to respect the dominant way to write, even if we dont, cant, or wont ever write that one way ourselves. That be hegemony. Internalized oppression. Linguistic self-hate. But we should be mo flexible, mo acceptin of language diversity, language expansion, and creative language usage from ourselves and from others both in formal and informal settings. Why? Cuz nobody can or gone really master *all* the rules of any language or dialect.

So, what happen when peeps dont meet the dominant language rules? Well, some folks can get away with not meeting those rules while others get punished, sometimes severely, for not doing so. Let me go a lil mo way with this: Even university presidents and highly regarded English professors dont always speak and write in the dominant standard, even when they believe they do.

Remember when Fish put former Harvard President Lawrence Summers on blast in 2002? What had happened was, Summers called professor Cornell West to his office and went straight off on the brotha for writin books everybody could read, for writin clear, accessible scholarship. Summers apologized after the media got involved, sayin: "I regret any faculty member leaving a conversation feeling they are not respected" (qtd. in Fish, "Say It Ain't So"). Fish say: "In a short, 13-word sentence, the chief academic officer of the highest ranked university in the country, and therefore in the entire world, has committed three grammatical crimes, failure to mark the possessive case, failure to specify the temporal and the causal relationships between the conversations he has and the effects he regrets, and failure to observe noun-pronoun agreement" ("Say It Ain't So").

But get this: Fish's correction of Summers is suspect, according to a grammar

evaluation by linguist Kyoko Inoue (2002). Inoue say, “What the writer/speaker says (or means) often controls the form of the sentence.” She say Summers’ *intent* make his sentence clear and understandable, not rules from the grammar police-man.

But Fish gone ignore Inoue again, as he did back then in 2002. Fish gone say that the examples of Summers and the corporate workers show reasons why we should teach mo standard grammar, that if corporations and high ranked universities got folks who cant write rite, we gotta do a better job of teachin the rules. And since most of those workers are white, he gone also say he not supportin prejudice. He dont like it when whites dont speak rite, just the same as he dont like it when Latinos not speakin rite. Race aint got nothin to do with it, he gone add. It be only about speakin and writin standard English. He say his words apply to everybody not just to those who be wantin “a right to they own language.”

But here what Fish dont get: Standard language ideology insist that minority people will never become an Ivy League English department chair or president of Harvard University if they dont perfect they mastery of standard English. At the same time the ideology instruct that white men will gain such positions, even with a questionable handle of standard grammar and rhetoric (I think here of the regular comments made about former President Bush’s bad grammar and poor rhetoric). Fish respond that this the way our country is so let’s accept it. I say: “No way, brutha!”

Also, Fish use his experience teachin grad students as evidence for his claim. He say his grad students couldnt write a decent sentence. Well, they wrote good enuff in they essays to get into grad school, didnt they? And most grad schools admit students by committee, which mean some of his colleagues thought the grad students could write rite. But it sound like Fish sayin he the only one who could judge what good writin is—not his colleagues. What is Fish really on, what is he really tryin to prove?

I, for one, sho aint convinced by Fish. I dont believe the writin problems of graduate students is due to lack of standard English; they problems likely come from learnin new theories and new ways of thinkin and tryin to express that clearly, which take some time. New ideas dont always come out clear and understandable the first few times they expressed. And, further, grad students also be tryin too hard to sound smart, to write like the folk they be readin, instead of usin they own voices.

In my own experience teachin grad students, they also tend to try too hard to sound academic, often using unnecessary convoluted language, using a big word where a lil one would do, and stuff. Give them students some credit, Fish! What you should tell them is there be more than one academic way to write rite. Didnt yo friend Professor Gerald Graff already school us on that in his book *Clueless in Academe* (2003)? He say he tell his students to be bilingual. He say, say it in the technical way, the college-speak way, but also say it the way you say it to yo momma—in the same paper. Now that’s some advice!

But Fish must dont like this advice. He say that we should have students to translate the way they talk into standard English on a chalk board. He say, leave the way they say it to momma on the board and put the standard way on paper. This is wrongly called code switching. And many teachers be doin this with they students. And it dont work. Why? Cuz most teachers of code switching dont know what they be talkin bout. Code switching, from a linguistic perspective, is not

translatin one dialect into another one. It's blendin two or mo dialects, languages, or rhetorical forms into one sentence, one utterance, one paper. And not all the time is this blendin intentional, sometime it unintentional. And that's the point. The two dialects sometime naturally, sometime intentionally, co-exist! This is code switching from a linguistic perspective: two languages and dialects co-existing in one speech act (Auer).

But since so many teachers be jackin up code switching with they "speak this way at school and a different way at home," we need a new term. I call it CODE MESHING!

Code meshing is the new code switching; it's multialectalism and pluralingualism in one speech act, in one paper.

Let me drop some code meshing knowledge on y'all.

Code meshing what we all do whenever we communicate—writin, speakin, whateva.

Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal *and* informal speech acts.

This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it's sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there aint no one way to communicate.

Code meshing also be used to add flavor and style, like journalist Tomas Palermo do in the excerpt below from his interview with Jamal Cooks, professor of Education. In his online article "Rappin about Literacy Activism," Palermo write:

Teachers frequently encounter him on panels with titles like "The Expanding Canon: Teaching Multicultural Literature In High School." But the dude is also hella down to earth. He was in some pretty successful "true-school" era hip-hop recording groups [...]. Meet the man who made it his passion to change the public education game, one class at a time.

With vernacular insertions such as "but the dude is also hella down to earth" (not to mention beginning a sentence with the conjunction *but*) and adding the colloquial *game* to "public education," the article, otherwise composed in mono-dialect standard English, shift into a code meshed text.

Here some mo examples:

(1) Iowa Republican Senator Chuck Grassley sent two tweets to President Obama in June 2009 (Werner). His messages blend together common txtngr abbrvs., standard English grammar and a African American rhetorical technique:

First Tweet: "Pres Obama you got nerve while u sightseeing in Paris to tell us 'time to deliver' on health care. We still on skedul/ even workinWKEND."

Second Tweet: "Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said 'time to delivr on healthcare' When you are a 'hammer' u think evrything is NAIL I'm no NAIL."

(2) Professor Kermit Campbell uses multiple dialects to compose *Gettin' Our*

Groove On (2005), a study of college writing instruction. In it he say:

Middle class aspirations and an academic career have rubbed off on me, fo sho, but all hell or Texas gotta freeze over befo you see me copping out on a genuine respect and love for my native tongue. [...] That's from the heart, you know. But I don't expect a lot of folks to feel me. (3)

(3) Chris Ann Cleland, a real estate agent from Virginia, express disappointment about President Obama's economic plan in an interview with the *Washington Post* (Rich):

"Nothing's changed for the common guy," she said. "I feel like I've been punked."

(4) Referencing Cleland's remark, the title of *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich's Op-ed article asks: "Is Obama Punking Us?" Rich writes in the last paragraph of his article:

"The larger fear is that Obama might be just another corporatist, punking voters much as the Republicans do when they claim to be all for the common guy."

The contraction "nothing's," the colloquial phrase "common guy," and the vernacular expression "punked," are neither unusual nor sensational. Yet, when these examples get compared to the advice giving about code switching, you get a glaring contradiction.

Students be told that vernacular language should be reserved for the playground with friends or at a picnic with neighbors, and that standard English be used by professionals at work, in academic writing, and when communicating with important officials. However, the colloquial language of two white, middle-aged professionals (Cleland and Rich), which appears in two of our nations most highly regarded newspapers prove this aint so, at least not no mo and prolly never was. The BIG divide between vernacular and standard, formal and informal be eroding, if it aint already faded. And for many, it's a good thing. I know it sho be for me.

The Internet, among other mass media, as well as the language habits of America's ever-growing diverse ethnic populations be affecting how everybody talk and write now, too. A term like "punked," which come from black culture to describe someone getting tricked, teased, or humiliated, used to be taboo in formal communication as was black people wearin braided hair at work in the 1980s. The professional world has become more tolerant of black hair styles. And that same world not only toleratin but incorporatin, and appropriatin, black language styles.

Actor Ashton Kutcher popularized the term "punked" with his hit TV show of the same title. That's probably how the word seeped into the parlance of suburban professionals ("I feel punked"; "Obama [...] punking voters"), although it still retains its colloquial essence.

Fish may reply, "But these examples be from TV and journalism; those expressions wont fly in academic or scholarly writing." But did you read Campbell's

book, Fish? What about Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977)? Is you readin this essay? Campbell blends the grammars and rhetorical styles of both black English and so-called standard English, along with the discourse of Rap and Hip Hop. He also blend in oral speech patterns (with the phonological representation of words like "fo sho" and "befo"). And his book is published by an academic press and marketed to teachers of English. Campbell just one of many academics—professors of language and writin studies, no less—who code mesh.

Still, Fish may say, "Yeah, but look, they paid their dues. Those professors knew the rules of writin before they broke them." To this objection, Victor Villanueva, a Puerto Rican scholar of American studies, as well as language and literacy, point to "writers of color who have been using the blended form [...] from the get-go" (351). As he put it, "The blended form is our dues" (351). They dont have to learn to the rules to write rite first; the blended form or code meshing is writin rite.

This brings us back to Senator Grassley's tweets. It's obvious he learned some cool techno-shorthand (e.g., "WKEND" and "delivr"). He also uses both the long spelling of *you* and the abrv. "u" in the same line. "We still on skedul" is a complete sentence; the backslash ("\\") that follow it function like a semicolon to connect the emphatic fragment to the previous thought. And the caps in "WKEND" and "NAIL" pump up the words with emphasis, which alleviates the need for formal exclamation marks.

Grassley's message be a form of loud-talking—a black English device where a speaker indirectly insults an authority figure. The authority figure is meant to overhear the conversation (thus loud-talking) so that the insult can be defended as unintentional. Grassley sent the message over his Twitter social network but he address Obama. He wanna point out what seem like a contradiction: If healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?

Grassley didnt send no standard English as a tweet. Twitter allow messages with 140 characters. The standard English question—if healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?—is 80 characters. Why didnt Grassley use this question or compose one like it? Cuz all kinds of folks know, understand, and like code meshing. So Grassley code meshed.

Code meshing be everywhere. It be used by all types of people. It allow writers and speakers to bridge multiple codes and modes of expression that Fish say disparate and unmixable. The metaphorical language tool box be expandin, baby.

Plus code meshing benefit everybody.

In the 1970's linguist William Labov noted that black students were ostracized because they spoke and wrote black dialect. Yet he noted that black speakers were more attuned to argumentation. Labov say that "in many ways [black] working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and *debaters* than many middle-class [white] speakers, who temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail" (qtd in Graff 37).

So when we teach the rhetorical devices of blacks we can add to the writing proficiency of whites and everybody else. Now, that's something, aint it? Code meshing use the way people already speak and write and help them be more rhetorically effective. It do include teaching some punctuation rules, attention to meaning and word choice, and various kinds of sentence structures and some standard

English. This mean too that good writin gone look and sound a bit different than some may now expect.

And another real, real, good result is we gone help reduce prejudice. Yes, mam. Now that's a goal to reach for.

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Virginia R. Dominguez: Wiggle Room and Writing

To dance in place, to move and shake, to wiggle. I increasingly like the image as a way of capturing what we do in writing, editing, teaching, and coaching writing in the current U.S. academy. We move and we stay in place.

I have been teaching in the social sciences for nearly 30 years, and I just spent the past 5 years editing a prestigious scholarly journal, the *American Ethnologist*. Neither my students nor I could have succeeded at all without writing a great deal, and the *American Ethnologist* would be a set of blank pages without the writing of others, my judgment about their writing, and my active intervention in the structure of their writing. But the longer I reflect on writing the more intrigued I am by an apparent contradiction that it is hard to know when to push for the reproduction of a form—and easy, nonetheless, to do so.

Much writing probably warrants a similar reflection, but I limit my remarks here to expository writing. Despite the play I wrote and directed in high school, creative writing is not my art form and I would be a very poor choice as teacher or coach of others trying their hand at it. But writing is still central to my work and attention to it key to my students' development as teachers, scholars, readers, researchers, and writers.

Indeed I live in a disciplinary world that cares about writing and that famously put the spotlight on its own forms of writing in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ The relation between the two is less known than the spotlight that James Clifford, George Marcus, and Clifford Geertz put on ethnographic writing in the mid-late 1980s in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) and *Works and Lives* (1988). But there is much more to consider than that lively debate on writing as representation addressed, whether by design or happenstance.

I reflect here on four observations I have made over the past few years: first, that despite critiques of genres, realism, transparency, essentialism, and social or cultural representation recognizable forms of writing persist; second, that those recognizable forms of writing exist across several intellectual generations, including those just entering the profession; third, that while some attention tends to be paid to those forms of writing in graduate programs of study in the U.S. much of what is learned is learned informally and often only partially; and, fourth, journal editors and manuscript reviewers tend to notice the structure of those forms of writing in manuscripts submitted to a scholarly journal, identifying the presence or absence of expected elements and passing judgment on a manuscript at least in part because of the familiarity of its structure.