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English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States

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Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge. 354 pages. ISBN-10:0415559103/ ISBN-13:978-0415559102

The inherent versatility exhibited in the various writing genres of talented linguist, Rosina Lippi-Green, is as remarkable as her seemingly random interest in quilting. Her ability to make connections with many things, in addition to fabric, is neither coincidental nor haphazard. It is far from surprising, therefore, that this independent scholar claiming “mixed European ancestry” utilizes three authorial guises: two for penning historical fiction and a third for academic writing endeavors, the most recent being *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. Extensive documentation and factual data are but two persuasive means of support she utilizes to focus on and convince readers that the power of language upon social structures, especially in the discrimination and subordination of others, remains more strongly embedded than most people realize.

The former University of Michigan professor supplies various types of evidence to substantiate her thesis that language is used as a powerful tool of discrimination and subordination amongst and between speakers of English, particularly against those who speak variations of “standard” English. The intensity of Lippi-Green’s passion for exploring language discrimination goes beyond multiple dimensions, capturing her audience and comprehensibly guiding them along a well-informed path toward insight into the pervasive power play instituted by those who attest to the supremacy of Standard American English.

When native speakers of U.S. English are confronted with an accent which is foreign to

them—either unfamiliar varieties of English, or foreign (L2) accented English, the first decision they make is whether or not they are going to participate. [Often] members of the dominant language group feel empowered to reject their responsibility, and to demand that a person with an accent carry the majority of the burden in the communicative act. The accents we hear must go through our language ideology filters. In extreme cases, we feel completely justified in rejecting the communicative burden and the person in front of us (Lippi-Green, 2012, pp. 72-73).

The author’s knack of infusing historical facts and statistical data in an interesting way throughout each of the 18 chapters, attest to her expansive knowledge of history. Taking an excerpt from one letter written in 1753 by Benjamin Franklin, who according to Lippi-Green was “particularly irritated” by Germans and the German language, and he expressed his fear of multilingualism during a time when many German immigrants had come to the United States. Whether this fear was voiced by Benjamin Franklin or others, the fact remains that public fear of multilingualism has existed for years, and relates to shifting power bases and the development of legislation. The award-winning novelist delves deeply into commonly held beliefs and attitudes toward American English variation that often come with severe consequences when they influence personal and institutional policy.

With down-to-earth confidence that finds a pedantic agenda unnecessary, the Princeton grad adeptly establishes a strong foundation and



creatively integrates timely information such as ongoing or recent court cases alongside qualitative and quantitative data. She proves her point about how various systems have gotten away with heinous crimes that can be traced to language discrimination. One such case she highlights is that of a pregnant Mexican woman from Oaxaca, who spoke Chitana, an indigenous language. When the Oaxacan woman delivered her infant daughter at a hospital in the deep south, the Spanish-speaking social worker assigned to assist the new mother was seemingly put off because of the new mother's inability to speak either English or Spanish. In addition to the social worker's own personal prejudice, she also had a hidden agenda. Claiming that the Chitana-speaking woman was an unfit mother, the infant daughter was removed from her custody and conveniently placed in the home of the social worker's attorney-friend, who wanted to adopt a baby. After a lengthy, one year court case, the baby was finally placed back in the hands of the biological mother.

The author's examples and explanations are as varied as her tendency to connect them. In one of Lippi-Green's university classes, she presented and compared the concept of standardized English to that of standardized humans: they must be the same color, shape, size, height, and weight; no variations were acceptable. With other such comparisons, many of which were laced with cynicism, humor, and irony, the author establishes the variability and versatility of language linking the reality that all spoken language is variable: it changes. Furthermore, she cites inherent human hypocrisy as a reality within and across groups

who judge others even when the integrity of their own dialect or mode of speaking may be in question.

The author engages her reader in a multitude of ways that preclude boredom, and even entertain those of us with a penchant for language scrutiny, psycholinguistics, or sociolinguistics. Lippi-Green is as adept comparing the pros and cons of language theory as she appears to be switching proverbial hats and pseudonyms throughout her prolific, award-winning writing career. *English with an accent* is so comprehensive that it is likely to be considered a reference book. Exhibiting characteristics of a compendium or a handbook for multiple disciplines, including social justice and particularly in the field of sociolinguistics, the author infuses the textbook with many bonuses: a companion website, which can be utilized by instructor as well as student, an instructor's manual, audio and video clips, RSS Feeds, Blogs, Web Links, as well as other resources. *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States* is a resource to which this lifelong learner, researcher, and reviewer will refer time and again, continuously revealing yet another interesting facet of language discrimination. In addition to those fascinated by language, proponents of social justice will likely find Lippi-Green's book worth much more than its weight.

References

- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge.

THE AUTHOR

ELIZABETH LAURENCE holds an undergraduate degree in Journalism and a graduate degree in Multicultural Studies. She received certification as a Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), spending more than fifteen years as a high school and university educator in the U.S. and abroad. Her penchant for cultural encounters was key to overseas experiences in Cyprus, Germany, Iran, and Korea. She pursued an Ed.D at Texas A&M University—Kingsville while serving as International & Multicultural Programming Coordinator and Adjunct Faculty.

