Skyler MacDougall

The Case for a Standard Language

Language. Its central to how humans communicate. We use it constantly, from that formal email you have to write to your boss explaining that you were definitely out sick and not hanging out with your friends instead, to communicating with those friends that you were hanging out with. It’s often such an integral tool that it’s difficult to come up with a metaphor for it. What is something that everyone, universally, regardless of income, location, or age uses always, nearly every day of their lives?

As understanding others is such an essential part of living as a human, one would think that there was a uniform, consistent way that everyone could communicate. Computers need this, and they have it. It took a little time, but the now ubiquitous USB, and its offshoots are standard, in one form or another, on practically any computer. (Some would make the argument that phones are computers, and thus iPhones break this rule, but thats a separate discussion entirely.) It took a while for USB to earn the “U” in its name, but if you zoom out to the scale of humanity, it took no time at all.

But, we don’t have one *human* language, despite attempts spanning from Esperanto to English. And it can even be difficult to converse within the same language! This problem gets so bad that individuals in North Korea and South Korea, while technically speaking the same language, can’t actually understand each other at times. We’ve attempted to do so with English, having a professional, educated syntax and diction that have become expected in certain situations. The idea is that both you and the reader can understand what’s going on, while using the language to its fullest. While the idea was well-intended it is extremely imperfect. As James Gee points out in, “Discourse, small-d, Big D”, “We don’t invent our language, we inherit it from others” (*2*). This means, we have to be reliant on others to be correct in their understanding if we are to communicate with the world without being corrected. If we inherit something “wrong,” something that doesn’t follow the “rules,” then we sound ignorant. I don’t mean an objective set of rules, as language moves too constantly. I mean the set of rules set by colleges, high schools, and workplace documentation criteria that force a certain form of language. But, there’s no way of checking with the world at large that what we’re learning is right until we’ve ultimately already learned it. This means that, if we learn something “wrong”, we can try to correct it, but that still may not be enough, as the damage may have already been done, and reputation is everything in todays day and age. Vershawn Ashanti-Young goes even further in, “Should Writer’s Use They Own English?” saying that conformity in language is similar to racial discrimination, going so far as to say “The two be intertwined” (110). Gloria Anzaldua even says in, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” that there is no way of attempting to connect differences in dialect, “they can only be cut out”. Both Young and Anzaldua come from minority backgrounds, so their reaction is completely understandable. English, and those who use it regularly, have done horrible things to many native peoples, and Anzaldua’s point holds little exaggeration. In the United States alone, the number of Native American tribes wiped out, damned to extinction, and faded away are hard to count.

Alright then, if there is that much trouble, then why even try to communicate between the different groups? Gee seems to agree, saying that even if you say something that is grammatically correct in English, what you’re saying “is wrong nonetheless”. We also have to get down the mannerisms, actions, clothing, accent, and everything else that you can truly be believed to be a part of the group. However, this is where Young disagrees. Young suggests that translating between your different versions of English, your “Discourse” as Gee puts it, is important. More than simply important, its integral to being human, enough to the point that he made term for it, *code-meshing*. Young says that code-meshing is used “just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers” (114). He says that it’s even used to make a point that “standard” English doesn’t exist, “There ain’t no one way to communicate” (114). You’ve undoubtedly done it before, having to explain something to your older relatives, or perhaps your boss, who “just aren’t with it anymore”.

So, it’s alright to merge Discourses, but the academics might get a little squeamish about it. But, this means that there should still be a standard language! Appease the academics, and all is well! But, again, this assumption isn’t the right thought. Young and Anzaldua, both of which are coming from minorities, are clearly against it. Young says that even the higher up, corporate jobs can’t successfully do this, Referring to a National Commission on Writing survey that noted that in 2004 “businesses were spending as much as $3.1 billion annually on remedial training”(A23) to ensure that they speak the right English. Anzaldua goes further, saying that racial identity amplifies one‘s self identity, or it can destroy it. Her language, Chicano, isn’t considered a real language, by either English speakers or Spanish Speakers, and she can’t take pride in herself “until I can take pride in my language”(39). Gee, by comparison, comes from a straight, white, male history, and as such, one might expect that he would think differently, given the different background. But even he says that we change ourselves to fit our environment, and that we use our Discourses as costumes to hide ourselves, and make it seem like we belong. Because he makes this distinction, I’m honestly lost as to why he doesn’t feel differently about communication between Discourses. Hiding under a mask 24/7 is rough on anyone

In the process of writing this paper, I consistently had a problem with picking a side I can understand both sides of the argument quite well. But, in the end, not being restricted to a specific language, leaving all the doors open to the authors mind, allows for so much more creation. And if you can’t understand a paper in the way it was originally written, then it can be taken as a way to learn more about the world, and expand your horizons as a reader. After all, why else do we read?