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The Discourse and Identity of Ourselves

Throughout grade school, students from both public and private institutions are instructed to write in a very particular way. They are told to never start a sentence with a conjunction, to never end a sentence with a preposition, to never use personal pronouns. But if we do so, how can our readers truly know where we are coming from? How can they know they are reading the words that the writer means to say and not what they are told to say? They can’t, because if everyone were to use the same set of rules for writing, then there would be no diversity, and therefore no culture. The art of being an author would dull, and self-expression would be tainted. Look at it like poetry—poetry does not often follow standard writing conventions; it follows the artist’s conventions to portray the exact emotion they mean to. If poetry were to be processed through an online grammar-checker, they would all fail, especially the ones we appreciate for their divergence from the norm. We are told to use our “voice,” but how can we have a voice when we cannot share our thoughts in the voices in which they are created in our heads?

This is the idea of “Discourse” described by James Gee. To Gee, Discourse is more than just how we talk and write, it is also how we act, react, and hold ourselves. It is part of who we are as individuals. Gee refers to it as an “’identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write” to form the perception of who we think are (or who we think we ought to be) (7). One’s Discourse(s) are formed by experiences. They form from other’s Discourses. They form when one attempts to fit into a group, taking up the collective Discourse of the group. One’s “primary Discourse” is the one formed by early family connections (or disconnections) and their first friends. Gee states that this Discourse does not change very much through life, but the “secondary Discourses” do. The secondary Discourses are those that are formed to conform to (or deviate from) particular social environments, whether that is to obtain prestige within a society (dominant Discourse) or to acquire reputation within a social group (non-dominant Discourse) (Gee 7-8).

These Discourses are what define us as people, inside and out. Limiting our Discourses by setting rules to English literature is comparable to limiting the freedom of speech. By restricting how we can say things, we are subconsciously restricting the ideas that are said. We are conforming to a single, “perfect” culture, where expression acquired throughout life, such as dialect and diction, can only be used in unnatural cases. Take the comma for example. The comma is often used “incorrectly” by many English standards. However, it is also a fantastic way to organize thoughts and maintain a certain flow throughout the author’s ideas. The comma can be a beautiful medium for breaking and continuation, but many of those instances are frowned upon by high-school English teachers as they do not follow the “rules.”

Vershawn Ashanti-Young very clearly expresses his stance on this idea with his syntax in “Should Writer’s Use They Own English?”. His purposeful misspellings and incorrect grammar indicate he is attempting to say that these broken rules should be ignored to preserve Discourse and voice. He specifies “grad students also be tryin too hard to sound smart, to write like the folk they be reading, instead of usin they own voices” (113). He has a point: the English standard has become so strict, especially in the academic sense that most academics have lost their voice.

However, in my own reading of Ashanti-Young’s article, I found it unnecessarily difficult to understand him. Talking and writing with limited linguistic rules also creates a bit of chaos, sometimes a little too much for our liking. Young understands this subconsciously and ends his use of bad grammar to continue in a more conventional writing style when he needs to clearly represent what he is saying. "The contraction “nothing’s,” the colloquial phrase “common guy,” and the vernacular expression “punked,” are neither unusual nor sensational" (Young 115). Some of young's phrasing and diction are more standard and don't fit with the writing style he was attempting to keep up with throughout the rest of the text, indicating his bad grammar and language was forced, not natural as he wants us to speak and write. I understand his point of conforming our understanding of language rather than conforming the language itself, but that would take generations to accomplish and not all subcultures would adopt the idea.

For the purposes of academic and professional writing, where communication is the primary objective, language should have at least some standardization. Doing so would allow as many as possible to grasp the concepts shared. However, we should also do so while loosening our strictness of grammar. A significant amount of voice is expressed in grammar, so allowing for more diverse uses of language will keep Discourses intact in writing, yet keep spelling and structure defined enough for academics to understand. Ashanti-Young took his argument to the extreme and found himself stumbling over his own words. On the contrary, for artistic and creative writing pieces, authors can go as wild as they please, since the objective in such writing is to express a feeling. Diverse language allows for that expression in surplus for the mind to explore, but can leave the reader confused if their purpose is to grasp a concrete concept the author is trying to communicate.

**Works Cited**

Gee, James Paul. “Literacy, Discourse, and Lingusitics.” *Journal of Education, Boston University*, vol. 171, no. 1, 1989, pp. 5–17.

Young, Vershawn Ashanti. “Should Writer's Use They Own English?” *Writing at the University*, pp. 110–117.