3 Things linguists know about language

Facts about language

We have seen that language produces the social categories that are relevant in any given culture. Stereotypes develop through repeated d/Discourse representations of category members as indexical links solidify between a category and particular practices, styles, actions, and ways of being. The richest set of such indexical links within any culture is the set of indexical meanings associated with forms of language variation. Stereotyping a social group as being violent or uneducated is typically recognized as a form of prejudice. Through symbolic revalorization, however, patterns of language variation continue to be open to stereotypes and public criticism. The way people speak is often treated as if it were simply a matter of choice, as if speaking an undervalued variety of English were a conscious act of anti-social rebellion. This is because the dominant language ideology in the United States continues to promote beliefs that linguists know to be myths, ideas that have no concrete basis in reality.

What is symbolic revalorization?

Symbolic revalorization of language is a term used in linguistic anthropology to describe the process by which the attitudes one holds about language (e.g., a word, an expression, or the whole system of meaning) come to symbolically stand in for (and replace) the attitudes they hold about the group of people who use that language. Or, as Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 92) put it, "Symbolic revalorization often makes discrimination on linguistic grounds publicly acceptable, whereas corresponding ethnic or racial discrimination is not."

Just as racial categories persist as an idea despite biological evidence to the contrary, the ideas associated with "standard" English persist despite linguistic evidence to the contrary. Discriminatory language ideologies persist through deeply embedded Discourse related to language. Society has largely stopped teaching racist beliefs about imagined biological differences, but it continues to feel normal to tell particular groups of children that the way they speak is somehow "wrong." The persistence of discriminatory language ideologies is also aided by the widespread belief that everyone "knows" about language. People often feel that they understand language because they are able to speak one. This is no different from claiming to understand how the human brain works because you have one or that you understand

DOI: 10.4324/9781003332886-3

the laws of physics because an apple fell on you. It is still common for people to not know exactly what linguistics is or why it might be important. A few basic facts about language should demonstrate why the dominant language ideologies in American society reproduce forms of social inequality. In this chapter, we outline some basic linguistic "facts of life," including the following:

- All languages (whether spoken, signed, or written) are equal in terms of linguistic potential
- Variation is intrinsic to all languages at every level; that variation carries indexical meanings that serve to reproduce social structures
- Everyone speaks a dialect; everyone has an accent
- All living languages change over time
- Children know the rules of their native language at an early age – well before they would begin school

These facts are crucial to understanding why language ideologies that promote the idea of a single variety of "standard" English are wrong and not just a question of taste or opinion. As it relates to English in the American context, we explore how:

- "Standard English" is an idealized imagined dialect
- The fact that children know the rules of English before they enter school means that teaching "standard English" can be seen as an attempt to eradicate patterns of variation that convey minority identities
- Communicative effectiveness results not from using "proper" grammar but rather from using linguistic variables with indexical meanings that align with the expectations for a given context

Linguistic potential

All over the world, right at this moment, very young children are acquiring a first (and, in the majority of the world's children, a second) language, and every one of them is going through the same stages at just about the same ages. A child in Papua New Guinea and a child in Carson City, Nevada, born on the same day will mirror one another as they go through those exact same stages, even if one of them is acquiring Kaluli and the other is acquiring American Sign Language. In Nairobi or El Paso, Okinawa or Bruges, the stages are the same. Those stages are:

1. babbling (repetitive consonant – vowel syllables such as bababa or tatata)
2. one or two syllable words in isolation (duck, car, teddy)
3. two-word strings (more juice, get down, want that)
4. the telegraphic stage, where grammatical bits are mostly left out (Elmo kiss baby doll, Where mama going? I tie it myself) (see Burkette & Kretzschmar 2018)

The regular progression of acquisition continues until a child has full knowledge of a language's grammatical elements and complex structures and knowledge of what forms of language to use in which social contexts. Children with regular exposure to more than one language will move through these stages in both languages simultaneously until they are able to speak both.

One of the most important linguistic insights of the last century was a quite simple explanation of this pattern: this species-wide, universal pattern of acquisition across languages could not be coincidental. Noam Chomsky proposed what now seems obvious:

> The fact that . . . children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specially designed to do this, with data-handling or "hypothesis-formulating" ability of unknown character and complexity.
>
> (Chomsky 1959: 62)

In other words, brains are hard-wired for language; it is part of a human's DNA. As with any biological capacity, there will be tremendous individual variation in how this capacity is expressed. Children vary in terms of exactly when they pass through each stage of acquisition, and some children may acquire language only with great difficulty or not at all. The children in this last group are described by doctors and researchers as having a language disorder (LD); LD can be associated with another medical condition (such as non-verbal autism or Down syndrome) or it can be specific to language (developmental language disorder, which has historically also been called a *specific language impairment*).

One fact that will be familiar to parents but might surprise people without experience with language acquisition is that when, or even if, human children acquire language has nothing to do with intelligence. Language acquisition in children appears to be about expressing the individual's capacity for language acquisition; no more, no less. A child has the innate capacity to acquire language, something like a blueprint in the mind, that makes it possible to recognize and absorb the structural patterns and sounds or signs of language. A child will naturally and automatically draw on their experience of the language around them to fill in and adapt those blueprints until they are completely competent in the language they are acquiring.

Given that children acquire language in the same way, it should not be surprising to find that all varieties of all human languages have the same basic structures. Each language contains a finite set of potentially meaning-bearing units. For signed languages, these units include handshapes, facial expressions, and the movement of a sign through space. For spoken languages, these units include vowels, consonants, melodies, and silences. In both cases, the set of possible units a language can use is universally constrained by the human bodies that produce and perceive them. In terms of sound, each language uses some, but not all, of the sounds that can be produced in the human vocal tract. Although the set of possible sounds a language can use is universal, languages vary widely in terms of which and how many of the sounds they use. For example, Taa (also known as !Xóõ, spoken in Botswana and Namibia) uses more than 80 different consonants while Pirahã (spoken in Brazil) uses only seven. The same is true for dialects of a single language.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (or the IPA)

Occasionally in this book we will refer to sounds using symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) which is included at the front of this book. The IPA is an attempt to create a (more or less) one-to-one mapping of written symbol to speech sound. The Latin alphabet, used to represent English spellings, does not have this same

sound-symbol correspondence for English pronunciations. For example, the letter "c" can be "soft," and sound like the letter "s" (like in "cent"), or it can be "hard," and sound like the letter "k" (like in "cup"). Linguists don't use this hard/soft distinction; instead, when a word features the letter "c" and it sounds like an "s," they use the same phonetic symbol that they would use to represent the letter "s" when it makes that sound: [s]. Same thing if it sounds like a "k." So the words "sent" and "cent," which are homophones despite this difference in spelling, would both be presented as beginning with [s]. IPA symbols are written in these square brackets to represent speech sounds. Linguists have created this system of symbols to represent the consonants and vowels of all the world's languages!

The sounds of a language are organized into systems in which each element stands in relationship to the other elements (linguists call this *phonology*). A language's phonology includes both the inventory of sounds available and, just as importantly, the way those sounds can be combined. English, for example, uses the sound linguists call "engma" [ŋ], the sound at the end of words like "ring" or "song." However, English does not contain any words that begin with this sound; the sound must always be in the middle ("kingdom") or end ("slang") of a word. This is not a physical limitation in the way engma is produced or perceived; other languages have no problem starting words with engma. You have probably encountered Vietnamese Americans who have names that start with the sound, such as Nguyen. Because one's ability to hear sounds is constrained by the phonology of the language(s) spoken, English listeners have no trouble hearing engma in the middle or at the end of a word but often hear this name as if it were the question "when?" pronounced with great emphasis so it has two syllables "whe-en?" with no engma sound at all! Children learn to recognize and produce all and only the sounds they hear used around them. They also learn the patterns for where each sound can and can't occur.

The ability to acquire language with ease seems to atrophy in adolescence. While learning a language in childhood is effortless, trying to learn a new language as an adult takes a huge amount of effort. When it comes to adult language learners, it seems most have the same difficulty in learning a second language. Their ability to sound native-like in the new language has faded. Brains have native phonologies to lean on, so they do. The product is a variety of the learned language that has clear indicators of the speaker's native language. This is why people who have learned a second language as adults tend to have foreign-sounding accents in that second language. Such accents are distinct from a language learner's skill in actually using the target language. Speaking another language with this kind of accent has little to do with the ability to speak and understand the language across different contexts. Rather, the inability to be "accentless" in a foreign language is just a natural result of the way in which the biochemical changes of adolescence alter the way the brain works.

As noted in Chapter 2, languages are arbitrary systems of signs used to convey human experience. People generally don't say that one arbitrary system is better than another because both are thoroughly arbitrary. It is the same with languages. It is not "better" for Eastern Pomo to mark epistemic states in its verb morphology any more than it is "better" for English to avoid conveying this information. All languages are equal in their ability to convey abstract, complex thought. They simply convey that thought in different ways. Some argue that some languages are "primitive" or "unusable" because they don't have words for concepts in the modern world. This is particularly silly because languages come up with new

words (neologisms) all the time. Borrowing words from other languages is a particularly common way of filling such gaps. Ultimately, coming up with words for speakers to use in a language is a trivial issue that is easily resolved. Indeed, Indigenous languages often come up with neologisms for use in educational contexts. For example, the K'iche' Maya Language Academy (in Guatemala) has come up with numerous neologisms in their language, including things like the term "metal bird" (*xik'ik'el ch'ich'*) to mean "helicopter."

Borrowings in English

English has borrowed words from a number of different languages. Can you match the English words with their original languages? Answers are below.

1. algebra	Twi
2. checkmate	Abenaki
3. tattoo	French
4. chocolate	Hindi
5. cigar	Japanese
6. skunk	Tahitian
7. okra	Maya
8. money	Farsi
9. shampoo	Arabic
10. honcho	Nahuatl (Aztec)

1. algebra, Arabic
2. checkmate, Farsi
3. tattoo, Tahitian
4. chocolate, Nahuatl
5. cigar, Maya
6. skunk, Abenaki
7. okra, Twi
8. money, French
9. shampoo, Hindi
10. honcho, Japanese

Neologisms in K'iche'

The following K'iche' neologisms are given with their literal translations in English. Can you match the neologisms with the English word with the same meaning? Answers are below.

volcano's vomit (uxa'oj ixkanul)	telescope
fingernails to eat with (ixk'eqwab'al)	passport
killer of bugs (kamsab'al chikopil)	crossword puzzle

volcano's vomit (uxa'oj ixkanul)	telescope
tool to block rain (q'atb'al jab')	magma
silver memento (pwaq natajsab'al)	umbrella
paper for crossing countries (wujq'axb'äl amaq')	fork
fire under the earth (q'aq' uxe'ulew)	remote control
tool to turn on and turn off (tzijchupub'äl)	lava
tool for seeing the face of the sky (ilb'al uwach kaj)	insecticide
lining up words (cholb'al tzij)	medal

1. lava
2. fork
3. insecticide
4. umbrella
5. medal
6. passport
7. magma
8. remote control
9. telescope
10. crossword puzzle

All languages (spoken or signed) share the same common basic structure that children automatically acquire in exactly the same way. Despite the linguistic evidence that speaking a language is an innate human ability and that all languages are equally able to convey any given idea, the dominant language ideologies in the United States continue to hold the discriminatory view that some languages (namely English) are naturally better than others. The same is true for dialects of English. All are equally valid systems for communicating human experiences, but some are treated as inherently "wrong" or "inappropriate" for use in particular contexts. The dialect that is typically deemed "correct" and "appropriate" is the dialect spoken primarily by speakers who are middle-class, cisgender, male, heterosexual, and white. Societies seem to always find a way to further marginalize the language varieties spoken by (already) marginalized people. To paraphrase George Orwell, all languages are equal, but some are more equal than others.

Variety is the spice of life!

Spoken language varies for every speaker in terms of speech sounds, sound patterns, word and sentence structure, intonation, and meaning. This is true even for those who believe themselves to speak an educated, elevated, supra-regional English. Variation is not a frivolous, sloppy, or useless feature of language. Quite the contrary, the variants available to the speaker to choose from are not neutral. The choice between these various options may not always be conscious, but it is often purposeful. The choices people make between variables, even if entirely unintentional, are reactions to their expectations regarding language use in a particular context. Although some people can recognize that others are speaking a different language or a different type of English, most linguistic variation usually fails to reach the level of consciousness. It is in the production and perception of speech sounds (functioning

in relationship to one another) that there is perhaps the greatest potential for variation in language, much of which goes unnoticed.

Linguistic variables fall into two broad categories: stable variation (where variables are used in the same way over a relatively long period of time) and change in progress (variables that are undergoing a change in their patterns of usage). An example of a stable variable would be saying the -ing suffix with the back of the tongue raised against the soft palate or velum (the [ŋ] sound in the International Phonetic Alphabet) or with the front of the tongue pressed against the (alveolar) ridge right behind the teeth (the [n] sound). In orthography, this variable is often represented as "g-dropping" (e.g., *runnin'* vs. *running*), and English speakers sometimes think of the [n] variant as lazy or informal even though the [n] and [ŋ] tongue movements require the same amount of energy to accomplish (see Campbell-Kibler 2007). An example of change in progress would be the movement of the [ɑ] vowel (the vowel in "pot") forward in the mouth to sound more like the [æ] vowel (the vowel in "pat"). This is a change currently spreading across cities along the southern shores of the Great Lakes (discussed further in Chapter 5). It is this change in progress that results in an accent where the word "Wisconsin" sounds like "Wis-CAN-sin."

All languages contain both types of variation. Language change is always happening. As particular variables come to take up indexical meanings, people begin to use or avoid those variables in new ways. When a variable comes to index characteristics that people find desirable, that variable is likely to spread. As long as a language has speakers, that language will be undergoing constant change. Young people always desire to distinguish themselves from their parents' generation so they will produce patterns of variation that are different from the generation above them. Although young people are often accused of "ruining" the language with their new-fangled ways of talking, innovations spread by young people are a sign that a language is alive. Indeed, in the same way that a forest will continue to add new leaves and branches as long as it is thriving, a language only ceases to undergo change when there are no longer speakers living their lives in that language.

You from Missouruh?

The reality of language change is that it often reflects "linguistic fashion" as much as it does anything else. A wonderful example of a feature that has had its ups and downs in linguistic fashion is something linguists call "schwa raising." The schwa sound, represented as [ə] in the IPA, is a very common vowel in English, and it is the vowel sound in the second syllables of words like "soda" and "Sarah." When the pronunciation of such words ends with an "e" sound ("sody" or "Sary"), the vowel has been raised, represented by [i] in the IPA. This pronunciation is still pretty common among rural Southerners (words like "sody" as well as "Santy Claus" and "Grand Ol' Opry" are common examples), but, at some point in history, this feature, which was generally innocuous, became seen as "rustic" and therefore "not good." To "fix" their speech, some people tried to move back to the schwa pronunciation, and when they did so, they overextended the rule to include words that were pronounced with an [i] at the end but had not historically had a schwa, like "Missouri" and "Cincinnati." We write "fix" in quotes because this is what linguists call hypercorrection, a type of error caused by overgeneralizing the fix to a perceived error to words and forms where it never happened. This hypercorrection of schwa raising is why some people pronounce "Missouri" and "Cincinnati" as "Missouruh" and "Cincinnatuh" (but see Lance 2003 for more on the topic).

Are you a robot?

As patterns of language change spread in different ways, variables come to cluster together across social groups or regions forming distinctive dialects. For linguists, dialect simply refers to a set of variables that are shared across some group of speakers (defined by region or social group). So anyone who speaks a language also speaks a dialect of that language. Although non-linguists sometimes use dialect in a negative way, linguists see all varieties of any language as dialects, including even the most uppity, prestigious way of speaking you can think of.

Often when people talk about varieties of English that don't fit some idea of a "standard," they think of people who seem to have an "accent" of some sort. In so far as linguists are concerned, the term "accent," as it is used by non-linguists, has no technical or specific meaning, except, perhaps, that it is loosely connected to the pronunciation of some language variety. Although the term "accent" is widely used by non-linguists as a loose reference to a specific "way of speaking," people rarely give any official or technical specification for what this might mean in actual linguistic terms. There are two widely recognized elements to what serves to distinguish "accents" (or "ways of speaking") in the minds of speakers.

1. Prosodic features. The sound structure (phonology) of a language includes consideration of intonation or patterns of pitch contours. This includes stress patterns, both at the lexical and sentence level, but it also touches upon other factors such as rate of speech, volume, or patterns of pausing.
2. Segmental features. People acquire, as part of their first language, the sounds of the language which fall into two major categories: vowels and consonants. As children, they acquire the specific ways in which each of these sounds are produced by the speakers in their communities.

As an example of element 1, currently in American English, there is one very active point of variation having to do with stress, in a small set of words including *insurance*, *adult*, and *cement*. First syllable stress has been documented for these words in the South, while in other parts of the United States the stress is more commonly found on the second syllable: INsurance (South) vs. inSURance (elsewhere). For element 2, some speakers of US Englishes distinguish between the words *dawn* and *Don* (Southerners, Northeasterners, and some people in northern cities like Detroit and Chicago), while for others these are homophones. The same is true of words like *tent* and *tint*, which are pronounced the same way for most Southerners but tend to be pronounced differently in other parts of the country. This follows quite reasonably from the fact that there are many possible sound systems for American English. Each of these different sound systems could be considered a different "accent."

Hawgs and Dawgs and Hawt

The mascots of the University of Arkansas (razorbacks, or "hogs") and the University of Georgia (bulldogs) are often spelled as *hawg* and *dawg*. This non-standard spelling emphasizes the regional pronunciation of these words with the vowel in Dawn or taught ([ɔ]) rather than with the vowel in Don or tot ([ɑ]). In many other parts of the country people pronounce these words with the same vowel ([ɑ]) and typically can't hear a distinction between words like *taught* and *tot*. For many speakers, the "aw" ([ɔ]) pronunciation came to index being from the South.

This photo (Figure 3.1) shows a B-29 plane from World War II on display at the Imperial War Museum in Duxford, UK. Pilots often painted the sides of their planes, and this pilot (presumably from Arkansas) chose to paint a Razorback, or "Hawg." This is also an example of hypercorrection, and it showcases why some people write or hear people pronounce words like *hot,* which have traditionally had the [ɑ] (cot, tot) vowel, as "hawt" hypercorrecting to a novel [hɔt] pronunciation.

Figure 3.1 Hawg pilot from World War II
Source: photo by ducatipierre

This is exactly why linguists say that there is no such thing as an "unaccented" variety of a language. Accent simply has to do with the sounds (or signs) used in a language: which sounds occur, what handshapes are used, how those forms are distributed, and how those forms are produced. No spoken language can exist without phonology, and since "accent" refers to variations in phonology, everyone who speaks a language has an accent. Indeed, even if everyone spoke English in the same way, their language would still be "accented" because it would necessarily have sounds. The same is true of signed languages, where the organization and location of handshapes and the specific movements a speaker uses combine to result in different "accents" of a signed language. Every native speaker of American English (or any other language) has an accent, no matter how unmarked or marked the person's language may seem to be. This includes broadcast news personalities, English professors, actors, politicians, or anyone else who is generally thought to speak "properly." Accents are nothing special. Everybody has one. You've got one too.

Accent can be understood and defined in a comparative sense. You travel to a small town in Kansas, and unless you are from that area, *your* accent will likely be recognized as different, as locals tend to notice the differences between a new person's speech and the local speech. Often people assume that only those from other places ("outsiders") have accents. People often have strong, if conflicting, attitudes toward the different ways that English is pronounced in different places. For example, compare the results when the blog Gawker sponsored a competition to see which city has the "Ugliest Accent" in the United States (see Figure 3.2, left) with the results of the Big 7 travel website's annual poll of the "Sexiest American Accent" (Figure 3.2, right). The same places, representing the same accents, rank high on both lists.

The differences in speech across regions or social groups can be examined and identified so that a linguist might make a study of prosodic features and phonology to determine exactly what marks a person as from "someplace else." That "someplace else" can be another state, country, or even a different social group.

Although they are based in the regular variation in the production of the sounds of English, accents are primarily about how that variation is perceived. Sociolinguists (especially those involved in perceptual dialectology; see Chapter 9) know that the perception of accents is intimately linked to stereotypes about the social categories that are indexically

Figure 3.2 Top ten "ugliest" and "sexiest" accent rankings compared

associated with the "accented" speaker. The pronunciation of "tire" as homophonous with "tar" is likely to be perceived as indexing not only Southernness but also traits such as ignorance, racism, and barefootedness. Thus, when someone listens to another person speaking, they pay attention not only to how that person talks but to what they look like, how they dress, and so on. McGowan (2015) showed that even listeners with very little experience with Chinese-accented English who were asked to transcribe Chinese-accented speech did better when also shown a Chinese face. This finding suggests that these listeners were using both the sounds and the photograph to understand what was being said. In listening to others, people utilize the full spectrum of information about variation (in the speech stream, in image, in context, etc.) to simultaneously engage both linguistic and social categorizations. It is through such direct associations between speech and social stereotypes that language comes to reproduce forms of social inequality as individuals come to be judged in particular ways based simply on where they fall in the range of variation in the production of the sounds of English.

Gawker can create debate about which city has the "ugliest" accent because the perception of an accent as "pleasant" or "ugly" (and so on) depends on the perspective of the listener. Individuals are less likely to perceive an accent as "ugly" when that accent is similar to their own. Another important factor in the perception of accents is whether an accent occurs in a person's first language or in a language they learned later in life. In the case of first language accents, listeners tend to categorize them according to the social categories that are relevant in a given cultural context. The most common way in which first language accents are perceived is in terms of variation association with geography; in American English, that might mean an Appalachian accent, a Utah accent, a Seattle accent, or a Boston South Shore accent. In addition to variation across regions, first language dialects may refer to other social categories such as gender identity, race or ethnicity, social class, religion, or sexual orientation. These accents are invoked when listeners perceive a voice as "sounding like" the speaker is white, Jewish, gay, etc. First language accents may also index aspects of individual identity, as personality traits are often attributed to particular accents. People commonly remark on voices when they make statements like "She sounds nice" or "He sounds stupid."

Second language accents, on the other hand, occur when a native speaker of one language learns another language. When a person learns a language later in life, the phonology of their first language will usually influence how they are able to hear and produce the language they are learning. In American English, the vowel in "bait" is represented in IPA as [eɪ], which is a diphthong, or a single vowel during which the tongue moves between two places in the mouth. The production of the vowel in "bait" involves lifting the tongue as one makes the vowel so that one ends more like the vowel in "beat." Because this pronunciation of the "bait" vowel is automatic for English speakers, they typically continue to produce the vowel in this way when learning another language. A Spanish language teacher might become frustrated with their English-speaking students pronouncing this vowel "incorrectly" because the vowel is monophthongal, or with only a single configuration of the vocal tract, in Spanish. In IPA, it would be written as [e], which does not occur in English; these English-speaking students pronounce the name *Pedro* with the diphthong (['peɪ.dɹoʊ]), which sounds funny to native Spanish speakers.

When an English speaker says that a person has a Welsh accent, a Polish accent, or a Tagalog accent, then they are reacting to the ways in which their English pronunciation might be influenced by the phonology found in their first language. Spanish doesn't distinguish between the sounds at the beginning of the English words *sheep* and *cheap* ([ʃ] and [ʧ],

respectively, in IPA). Because of this, a "Spanish accent" may refer (in part) to variation in which these two sounds occur in the same places (such as pronouncing "chair" as "share"). Similarly, Japanese does not distinguish between "r" and "l" sounds so that variation in the distribution of these sounds may be perceived as "sounding Japanese."

Second language learners vary widely in the degree to which their native phonology impacts their pronunciation in a second language. In some cases, people might describe someone as having a particular second language accent simply because they know that speaker is from some other country or racial background associated with immigrant communities. Thus, native speakers of English from the Midwest who are perceived as Latinx or Asian may find themselves complimented on how amazing it is that they speak with their native central Ohio accent: "Your English is so good!"

English is spoken as a majority native language in more than 30 countries and territories and as a second (or third, fourth, eighth, etc.) language the world over, and it can be tricky to tease apart the perspectives people have about the many different kinds of English accents used. Americans tend to have positive attitudes toward the varieties of English found in the United Kingdom and in countries with high amounts of white settler colonialism. Braj Kachru (1992) refers to such countries as the "Inner Circle" countries, and this classification includes the varieties of English spoken in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

On the other hand, the accents of native English speakers not descended from white colonial settlers (in Kachru's classification system, these are called "Outer Circle" countries) are often viewed negatively. Native speakers of English from Asia and Africa are often seen as being more closely aligned with non-native English accents even though English is their first language. Indeed, varieties like Indian English are often openly mocked as part of racist caricatures, such as the character Apu on *The Simpsons*. These imagined caricatures influence the way many Americans genuinely experience interactions with speakers of Indian English working at call centers, for example.

The varieties of English spoken in communities descended from enslaved Africans also tend to have accents that may be subject to prejudice. These varieties of English are sometimes even treated as if they form some different class of languages ("Creoles") that some have argued shouldn't even be considered varieties of English. Thus, one could conceive of Americans' attitudes toward English accents as reflecting the dominant language ideology in the United States. Because these attitudes are not about the actual structure of the language, the hierarchy usually aligns with other, non-linguistic forms of social prejudice. Thus, societal racism aligns with attitudes toward English accents; the varieties spoken by middle-class white people are often seen as the "best" accents while varieties spoken by immigrants and minorities are often perceived as "bad" accents.

What could be seen as troubling, from a categorization perspective, is that each of these accents can, by definition, be described as simply containing variant ways of saying the "same thing." Thus, other accents differ from American English because they have feature X where "standard" English has feature Y and have feature A where "standard" English has feature B. For example, the consonant "d" is produced with the tongue curled back in Indian English but with the tongue pointed forward in American English. Similarly, American English uses a flap of the tongue to produce "t" or "d" between vowels in words like *water* or *flooded*, while British English may produce these words with a break in airflow (what linguists call a glottal stop, or [ʔ] in IPA), as in "wa-uh" for *water*. There is no linguistic reason for the different pattern found in Indian English to be "bad" nor is there any reason to view the difference found in British English as "better."

Beliefs about differences in accents are not about the accents themselves. Rather, they are about the social identities of speakers. For example, in "good" French accents, the [h] sound is never produced at the beginning of a word (as in *herbe*), but in British English, a "good" accent always pronounces [h] at the beginning of a word, such that *herb* and *Herb* are homophonous. If pronouncing word-initial [h] is "bad" for French but "good" for English, there is clearly nothing inherently "good" or "bad" about [h] itself. That is to say that attitudes toward different ways of speaking are about social, political, and historical perspectives. The actual linguistic features being discussed are secondary and may even be entirely irrelevant. Such attitudes are about the identities of those who speak "bad" English. This allows forms of discrimination to persist under the guise of "control" over a particular way of speaking. An employer can refuse to hire an African American because she pronounces words in a particular way and feel that they have not done anything that might be considered racist. Making hiring decisions based on "accent" will greatly reduce the number of immigrants and minorities in the applicant pool, thus making it much more likely for a white person to be employed. By narrowing opportunities for minority groups, language ideologies that perpetuate negative attitudes toward different English "accents" serve as a central component of discourse structural racism.

So-called Standard English

People have a natural tendency to think of "English" as a single, mostly uniform way of speaking associated with beliefs about the mythological "standard English." Milroy and Milroy suggest that standard varieties should not be understood as any specific language, but as "an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent" (1985: 22–23). The idea of a uniform variety of standardized English is just another myth that serves to maintain forms of social inequality. Yet people will say in all seriousness that they know people who speak "standard English," in all its supposed accentless glory. Despite all the hard evidence that all languages contain variation and undergo change, people steadfastly believe that a homogenous, standardized, one-size-fits-all language is not only desirable, but it is truly a possibility. In their efforts to promote this mythical, perfect standard variety, speakers of minority varieties of language often find themselves facing discrimination based purely on the ways in which they speak.

The language ideology promoting "standard" English openly creates fear and self-doubt when it comes to assumptions about the particular way an individual speaks. The potential consequences of not using the "appropriate" form of English serve to intimidate those who might already be concerned about the security of their position in American society. Google searches provide a sense of how large these issues loom in the minds of people more generally (see Table 3.1). Many people wanting to know more about "standard" English might search for information about "grammar," and a survey of discussions on this topic brings

Table 3.1 Number of Google hits for grammar terms

Google term search	*No. of hits January 2022*
"bad grammar"	293,000,000
"grammar advice"	256,000,000
"English grammar errors"	64,600,000

up hundreds of examples. Ultimately a large portion of the threads discovered with such a search have nothing to do with grammar, per se, but with matters of punctuation. No matter the topic, the tone can be affronted, sarcastic, condescending, servile, and, on occasion, silly to the point of absurdity.

The Discourse promoting a "standard" language is constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis by those who have a vested interest in the concept. People continue to accept this mythical language as not only real but somehow actually obtainable. Indeed, people are so comfortable with the idea of a standard language that they are very willing to describe and define it, much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn, describe a being from *Star Trek*'s planet Vulcan, or explain what the Tooth Fairy does. For the most part, people will undertake describing any of these even though they know that the thing they are describing is imaginary. That is, your description of a unicorn would be a great deal like those of others familiar with the concept because the concept of a unicorn is a part of shared cultural heritage, but it is still not a creature that you have seen or ever will see. You picked up your mental image (likely a horse with a single pointed horn growing from its forehead) at some point in your life; most probably you don't remember when or where. The same is true for what has been called "standard" American English.

The language ideology promoting "standard" English is an example of prescriptive grammar. Just as a doctor prescribes a particular regimen of medication or diet, prescriptivists are people who "prescribe" the "right" grammar for a speaker's "own good." The most extreme examples of prescriptive grammar come from those who make a living promoting the concept. Writers like Edwin Newman, John Simon, and James Kilpatrick published extensively on how English "should" be spoken and written. But unlike a doctor writing a prescription, prescriptive grammarians need not have any actual training or educational preparation to become language experts. Prescriptivists do not typically address the source of their authority directly; their expertise is taken for granted. They assume you will grant them authority because they demand it and because it has always been granted. Such people have made careers for themselves as prescriptivists because they meet a demand they created themselves.

Which is "correct"?

Of the following sentences, there is only one that prescriptivists accept as "proper" English. Can you tell which one? The answer is below.

1. I gave both of the boys twenty dollars.
2. He was running like his life depended on it.
3. The women whom the senator criticized in the papers are they.
4. We are still waiting on word from the doctor.
5. Who were you talking to?
6. The express lane is for customers with ten items or less.
7. You have to really study to pass that class.
8. You better not break that vase.
9. I need a book that will teach me about linguistics.
10. My answer is different than yours.

1. both should be each 2. like should be as if 3. "correct" 4. on should be for 5. rewrite as "To whom were you talking?" or, even better, "To whom were you speaking?" 6. less should be fewer 7. remove really to avoid split infinitive 8. "You better" should be "You had better" 9. that should be which 10. than should be from

What is it about the other sentences that make them "unacceptable"? How do you know? What does this tell you about "standard" English and how certain items come to be seen as "proper"?

In contrast to prescriptive grammar, linguists are interested in descriptive grammar, or the analysis of language as it is actually used by speakers. Linguists are interested in understanding how language works as a biological fact, a cognitive system, and a sociocultural phenomenon. This requires empirical, scientific methodologies. Unlike deciding to become a prescriptivist, becoming a linguist requires serious study and specialized knowledge. Because they are self-appointed experts, prescriptivists tend to approve of the linguistic varieties that are closest to their own speech (or, at least, how they imagine their own speech). Linguists Robin Queen and Julie Boland (2015) performed a series of experiments to determine what drives people to adhere to the language ideology of prescriptive grammar and, in turn, judge people who don't follow prescriptive language ideologies. They found that personality type was the strongest predictor of who is more likely to have negative reactions to "grammatical errors" (such as harshly judging people who confuse "you're" and "your"). People who were less agreeable, less open, and more conscientious were more likely to negatively evaluate others solely on the basis of grammar. It seems, then, that the main requirement for being a prescriptivist is having a particular (rather grumpy and rigid) personality (see Figure 3.3).

Like all myths, the details of "standard" English are hard to pin down. The various definitions that prescriptivists have proposed provides a sense of why the idea of "standard" English is untenable. The hypothetical Standard American English is the language spoken and written by persons:

- with no regional accent
- who reside in the Midwest, Far West, or perhaps some parts of the Northeast (but never in the South)
- who are easily understood by all
- who pay attention to speech and are not sloppy in terms of pronunciation or grammar
- with more than average or superior education
- who are themselves educators or broadcasters
- who enter into a consensus of other individuals like themselves about what is proper in language

It makes no sense to claim that speakers of the "standard" do not have a regional accent but only come from a particular region. It seems that prescriptivists want language to be geographically neutral because they believe that this neutrality will bring with it a greater range of communication. The assumption seems to be that the Midwest is somehow neutral. In the minds of the non-linguists (see Chapter 9 on perceptual dialectology), the areas of the country in which the hypothetical Standard is not spoken (primarily the South and New

Figure 3.3 Some people just can't contain themselves when it comes to correcting other people's grammar!

Source: photo by Eli Reusch via Flickr

York City) are the logical home of accents. From this assumption it follows that everybody else speaks the hypothetical Standard and has no accent. A native of Mississippi or Brooklyn may have exactly the same educational background, intelligence, and point to make as their counterparts in Ohio and Colorado, but many believe that their accents compromise the quality of the performance.

The definition that a speaker of the standard is one who is "understood by all" is equally silly. Are there really any speakers of American English who wouldn't understand sentences like "I ain't got no chocolate!"? The thinly veiled racism of prescriptivist language ideologies is apparent in the claim that speakers of the "standard" are those who "pay attention to their speech" and "aren't sloppy." Does it seem likely that speakers of undervalued varieties are "sloppy"? Is the argument that hip hop artists fail to pay attention to language when they write lyrics in undervalued Englishes (cf. Alim 2006)? Surely Alice Walker was paying attention to language when she wrote *The Color Purple*.

One claim associated with "standard" English that feels a bit closer to the truth is that its speakers enter into a consensus of other individuals like themselves about what is proper in language. Across these definitions the cycle that allows prescriptivism to persist is clear. The speakers of the elusive "standard" are educated, but they are also educators. Those who spend the most time trying to learn the "standard" are more likely to be the same people who spend their time promoting prescriptivism. For these "educated" people, something as important as language cannot be left to itself; "normal" people are not smart enough and not aware enough to be in charge of their own language. There must be experts, mavens, lexicographers – someone in charge. Language variation needs to be controlled through structured authority.

The problem is that those who declare themselves authorities on language tend to be white, upper-class, heterosexual, cisgender men and women who evaluate all other forms of language against their own. For the men in these categories especially, this is a common pattern. If we look closely at forms of structural racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, transphobia, etc., the behavior of straight white cis men seems to serve as an unspoken norm against which all others are judged. From a legal perspective, Mari Matsuda notes the similarities between the construction of the hypothetical Standard, or English without an accent, on one hand and hidden norms codified in legal institutions on the other:

> As feminist theorists have pointed out, everyone has a gender, but the hidden norm in law is male. As critical race theorists have pointed out, everyone has a race, but the hidden norm in law is white. In any dyadic relationship, the two ends are equidistant from each other. If the parties are equal in power, we see them as equally different from each other. When the parties are in a relationship of domination and subordination we tend to say that the dominant is normal, and the subordinate is different from normal. And so it is with accent. . . . People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent.
>
> (Matsuda 1991: 805)

Thus, "standard" English serves as a means of maintaining power. The myth of standard language persists because it is carefully tended and propagated, with huge, almost universal success, so that language, the most fundamental of human socialization tools, becomes a commodity. But the commodity that is "standard" English is almost universally the native dialect of the people in power. By rejecting the dialects of outsiders as "wrong," the group in power can propagate a linguistic obstacle that is required for economic success. This "standard" dialect is a myth, and its structure is never clearly defined. This lack of definition allows individuals to wield their self-proclaimed knowledge of "correct grammar" to silence the voices of anyone they see as a threat.

It is common to hear people say that "standard" English is needed to "unite" society. But this unification can only come through assimilation to a mysterious way of speaking that can never be pinned down. It seems that "standard" English does very little to actually bring Americans together. Rather, it serves not only to keep people apart, but to keep many silent and powerless. The ideology of "standard" English is the heart of discourse structural racism.

Communicative effectiveness *depends* on variation

Linguists and non-linguists both see grammar as a set of rules which must be obeyed, but they differ on the nature and origination of those rules. When linguists talk about grammar, they are thinking about the rule-driven structure of language. On the basis of those rules, individuals generate sentences. Children have acquired a working knowledge of the grammar of their native language by the age of 4. Because the idea of "correctness" is so bound up with prescriptivist ideologies, linguists use the term *grammatical* (rather than "correct") to refer to sentences that follow the set of rules that a person learns as a child. Something is only ungrammatical if it is something no native speaker of a language would say. Linguists mark sentences that are ungrammatical with an asterisk (as in "*Boots Jorge's muddy got when walked home in the rain he did.")

Noam Chomsky (1957) famously demonstrated the nature of grammaticality with the following examples:

1. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
2. Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.

Neither of these sentences conveys a meaningful idea. Ideas aren't green, nothing can be both green and colorless, sleep can't be done furiously, and so on. However, a speaker of any variety of English will recognize that the first sentence follows the rules of English grammar, while the second sentence does not. "*Furiously sleep ideas green colorless" is not grammatical for any speaker of English, descriptivist or prescriptivist. No child growing up in an English-speaking community would produce this sentence because they would naturally know that it didn't follow the rules of their grammar. Just as you never have to remind a child about other aspects of language-internal, rule-governed grammar, one need not tell a child to avoid saying such sentences. Doing so would be equivalent to telling a child something like: "Stop putting your articles after your nouns!"

One methodology linguists use to determine whether a sentence is grammatical is very simple: a person is asked if a given sentence suits their personal intuitions about what is OK (grammatical) to say in their variety of English. A set of four sentences will help demonstrate how this works:

1. Sam put a red scarf on the dog.
2. George took the dog.
3. Linda asked what Sam put the red scarf on.
4. *George took the dog that Linda asked what Sam put a red scarf on.

The first three sentences are grammatical (they sound well-formed, as something you might say or hear said) for native speakers of English. The third one will make most people stop and think, but it can be unraveled. The last one cannot. All varieties of all languages have rules that make some sentences grammatical and some ungrammatical, but because languages always contain variation, individuals will have slightly different rules, resulting in different patterns of grammaticality. Thus, for example, a speaker from the upper Midwest would likely find a sentence like "I'm going to the store, do you want to come with?" to be perfectly grammatical. However, a sentence like "*I'm gonna sit in the front, do you want to sit with?" would not be grammatical. Similarly, a person from the South might regularly say sentences like "I might should go to the store," but "*I should might go to the store" would be ungrammatical. In terms of prescriptivism, many of the sentences that are recognized as grammatical will simply be "incorrect." Thus, the goal of prescriptivism is not to teach the rules of English; those are known to native speakers before they ever enter school. The goal of prescriptivism, rather, is to push for forced linguistic assimilation as a way of marginalizing entire communities of speakers and creating obstacles that help preserve forms of social inequality.

In terms of effectively communicating, there are plenty of contexts where "standard" English would be inappropriate and ineffective for addressing a particular audience. In many Southern and/or African American churches, for example, preachers regularly use varieties that are undervalued in some groups and contexts for rhetorical effect. Undervalued varieties of English can be found in literature, film, popular music, and social media. It might be strange, for example, to have a song title like "Ain't no mountain high enough" be in

"standard" English (imagine, "There is no mountain that is sufficiently tall"). There are many contexts where the use of "standard" English is not an appropriate option.

Prescriptivists often confuse the acquisition of literacy skills with the process of learning a second dialect of ("standard") English. If the language in the classroom is the same as the language a child uses at home, the child is taught literacy skills in their own language. However, a student who comes to school with some other variety of English has to learn the dialect spoken in the classroom in addition to learning to read and write. This creates an additional obstacle for children who come to school with undervalued Englishes, as they are typically expected to acquire "standard" English without any explicit instruction (see Chapter 11). But expecting children to change the language they speak when they walk into school does much more than simply create one more roadblock for children who are already marginalized in the classroom. It sends a cruel and heartless message to children; it tells children that the language they use to think is simply wrong. Demanding "standard" English tells many minority, rural, and working-class children that everything they have known in their life up to this point has been wrong. It tells children that expressing their identity in public is wrong and potentially that their very existence is "inappropriate" for the school environment. If the language they speak does not belong in the classroom, it won't take long for children to assume that they don't belong in there either. At this point, prescriptivism has succeeded in segregating an otherwise integrated school (see Figure 3.4).

The failure to distinguish between learning to read/write and learning a second dialect is promoted through the idea that written language and "standard" English are somehow the same thing. Of course, any variety of English can be written. The use of undervalued Englishes is ubiquitous in American literature. If writing were truly limited to representations of "standard" English, a lot of amazing literature would be unavailable: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Harriett Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, Blackhorse Mitchell's *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navajo Boy*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, and so on. In these works, written language represents patterns of spoken linguistic variation. In addition to attempting to reflect spoken variation, there are patterns of variation specific to written language, including variant spellings (*color/colour*), abbreviations and shortened forms (*jk*/*lol*), different font choices (or font choices), or the use of emojis (☺). Just as with spoken language, variation in written language conveys indexical meanings. For example, going to the *theatre* is not entirely equivalent to going to the *theater*. Just as with spoken language, the exact indexical meaning of the variations (*theatre* and *theater*) may vary depending on the specifics of a given interaction. The spelling might index the location where the theater is actually located. Because *theater* is an American spelling, the use of *theatre* might index the theater as being outside of the United States. However, *theatre* could refer to a place in the United States that has been named with the less common spelling. Depending on the details of the context in which the theater is discussed, the theatre spelling could index some characteristic of the theater owners wish to convey. In such cases, the meaning of the theatre spelling would become clear when one considers the other variables that co-occur with *theatre*. It could index Britishness or some point in past time, as in *The Olde Theatre Diner* (located in Coventry, Rhode Island). It could also draw on the use of the *theatre* spelling in French to index prestige or social class, as in the *Chattanooga Theatre Centre* (located in Tennessee).

There are numerous web resources discussing "how to email your professor," and writing courses sometimes even address the "proper" way to do so. What should you call them? How

Figure 3.4 Companies like Grammarly.com depend on the fear that one's language might cause rejection by potential employers, teachers, or significant others

Source: photo by Victor D'allant

do you open the message? *Hi Professor!*; *Dear Dr. Chávez*; or simply *'Sup?* The reason there are websites giving this advice is because writing such an email can be intimidating. Before a person goes to college, they may have never written an email message to a college professor, but they will likely understand the power dynamics – they likely believe that the professor is in the power position, they are the subordinate, and choosing the appropriate form of address, tone, etc. is important. Without prior examples to compare to, however, one doesn't know what form the message should take. The fact that college is an environment associated

with beliefs about "standard" English only makes the anxiety worse. This is common with prescriptivist ideals – people are expected to adhere to them even though they never know exactly what it is they are trying to adhere to. In a context that is familiar, people don't need an explanation of what language is "appropriate" – you probably wouldn't get many hits on a website explaining "how to write a text message to your best friend." If an older relative asked you how to text like "kids today," you could probably come up with a list of rules they don't know (e.g., stop using periods, writing in all caps means screaming, use the right emojis). Teaching a grandparent to text would not be particularly different from teaching a student how to email a professor for the first time. In both cases, a person doesn't know which linguistic variables to use in a novel interactional context. Effective communication requires understanding which linguistic forms are more likely to appeal to a particular audience in a particular context.

Speakers are constantly adjusting to the interactions and events happening around them. They adjust their speech so that they use the linguistic forms that seem indexically appropriate for the context. When the context is unfamiliar, it makes it more difficult to communicate effectively. In addition to not knowing the indexical meanings associated with a context, a lack of familiarity creates anxiety which can further hamper the ability to communicate. Although an understanding of audience, goals, and context are critical, the most important factor in producing effective communication is the listeners' openness to the person speaking and the interaction taking place. If the audience fails to listen or refuses to cooperate, effective communication can never occur. Prescriptive ideology actually encourages people to refuse to cooperate with others. Those who speak in ways that don't align with expectations regarding some idealized "standard" are interrupted, corrected, and told that they are wrong. This turns the attention to the language the speaker used rather than the message they were trying to convey. The message gets lost in the shuffle, effectively silencing the person whose English was judged to be unacceptable. Although people are regularly taught how they should speak and write to communicate clearly, they are usually not taught how to listen to communicate clearly. For effective communication to occur, one must first acknowledge one's own role in comprehending those who speak differently from themselves.

Discussion questions

1. There are a number of borrowings in English that convert the sounds of the borrowing's original phonology to better fit with the sound system of English. For example, both Spanish and French (and most other languages, see Chapter 10) pronounce "r" sounds (also called rhotic sounds) differently than English. What is different in how a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Spanish say the word "burrito"? What about a French speaker saying "rouge"? What are some other examples of words English has borrowed that sound very different when spoken by a native speaker of the "donating" language?
2. Why would it be offensive to someone who is Latinx or Asian American and who was born and raised in the United States to be told that their English is "good"? What assumptions underlie such a statement?
3. Myths are a big part of the everyday lives of members of a culture. Most people within any given culture already understand them. How can such myths be explained to people who are unfamiliar with them? For example, how would you describe the Tooth Fairy? How does she get in? How much money does she bring? Now apply this thinking to

the idea of "standard" English. How would you describe it? Would you be able to tell someone exactly how to speak it? Why or why not?

4. Some people say "standard" English serves to "unite" society. Can you think of examples around the world where two groups speak the same language but have no societal unity? What about cases in the past where two groups spoke the same language but could not get along? Is it possible to have groups who speak different languages but live together peacefully?