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Assignment 4: Reflection

EDCI288C

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What exactly is Linguistics, and how much of an impact does this have on not only myself but everyone? If you had asked me this question back in September I probably would have made something up about how it’s the study of language, referring exclusively to spoken words, and without language how are we supposed to communicate with each other and grow. At this point in time I’d say it’s more than that, linguistics encompasses all aspects of language whether it be written, spoken, gestures, and any derivations of these that appear between different people. Most people are completely unaware to the degree that linguistics plays in almost all aspects of life such as education, career, family, and societal acceptance to name a few. Throughout this semester, we went through different aspects of language and really saw just how hard it was for someone who was foreign to the language or dialect of an area to really succeed and how people make assumptions about their socioeconomic status and basically their character based on the language they use.

Before proceeding, as I’m unsure of the audience this paper is supposed to be directed at, I feel as if it would be beneficial to clarify what I’m referring to when I talk about dialect. Dialect in a nut shell is a variation of a language. I know this is a very broad definition but a few examples should clear up any confusion that there may be. Two examples of dialect include the vernacular, which is a less formal version of English that you would use when on the phone with a friend, and regional dialect, for instance how even though you can tell someone from the southern part of the United States is speaking English you may not fully understand phrases/words they use. The key difference between these two is that the prior, more commonly known as register, is dealing with a situation where a single person changes the way they speak depending on who they’re talking to while in the latter case, the variation in language stems from the area the person is from. Even though both are forms of dialect, regional dialect brings with it linguistic stereotyping of the speaker, specifically their socioeconomic status, intelligence and credibility.

The best place to analyze the role dialect plays in the stereotyping of intelligence is in southern Florida looking at the population of people who speak Hattian Creole and Ebonics. In my assignment 2 media summary I analyzed the dialect of Rachel Jeantel, who was under fire during the trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, and how society immediately concluded that because she spoke in the African American vernacular her answers were unintelligible and thus she had no credibility. At first this was baffling to me, it was also the first time I was watching a video or just experiencing life with my mind actively looking for instances like this. Afterwards I decided to wander around internet news sources to try to get a grasp on how often this happens. It was everywhere, CNN, Newsday, Reddit, etc. and what was even more disconcerting was the fact that I remembered reading some of the article I came upon and for some thought the same exact thing. This just shows that even if an individual isn’t consciously linguistically profiling another person, that it can still be happening. This is something that we have talked about in my philosophy course *Know Thyself: Wisdom Through Cognitive* Science. In class we read an article, unfortunately I cannot find the name or author but I am still looking, that dealt with landlords and how they often time would not rent apartments to African Americans. The article went on to show that even if a person “sounded white” on the phone that that only got them to the next phase but when the landlord saw after meeting with the landlord, the leasing process wouldn’t move past there. Another area that dialect effects is the education and academic success of people who don’t use formal English as their primary language/dialect. This phenomenon comes in the form of phrasing that tests use to ask questions, which we studied for assignment 3. Now if you were given an exam that was in Finnish, and I may be making a huge assumption that you don’t speak Finnish, it would be unfair to then assess your intelligence and grasp of the material on how well you do on the exam. This is reflected in the fact that in predominantly Creole school districts in Florida, non-native English speakers tend to perform poorly across the board when compared to their native English peers. These are just some ways in which linguistic profiling is detrimental and often results in false and swift judgements of a person.

The presence of dialect is not a bad thing though. This translates almost directly to cultural diversity and adds to the reason the United States is considered a melting pot which is why we, as a society, should help it grow. In my personal attempts to navigate interactions, spoken and written, in which one party has a different dialect, I feel as if I have some ideas that could benefit both parties. Since starting this class I really make an effort to get to know a little about the author prior to reading their material. Now this may seem like it could potentially add to stereotyping on the author’s appearance but I feel the pros outweigh the cons. By getting to know the author, I have a sense of their cultural background that allows me to more efficiently lookup phrases or words that may be used across different cultures. For spoken conversations, if I know that the person I am talking to speaks a different dialect or language for that matter, I make an active effort to avoid the use of slang or idioms that would hold no weight in the conversation. Before ending off my reflection, I have two ideas that I’d like to put out there. The first deals with written pieces and the second with education. The first idea is a derivation of an already existing product, Genius Lyrics. Genius lyrics, genius.com, is a website where they analyze the meaning behind the lyrics in a song and give a historical or cultural example. Applying this to books, which are moving closer and closer to being solely online, this could have a huge impact and allow for people of all different backgrounds to appreciate the same literature and work. The other idea is for non-native English learners and tests/exams. While it is probably inefficient and too costly to produce tests in a numerous, and growing, number of dialects we can still mitigate the issue with teachers or proctors who are familiar with both the formal English language and the regional dialect spoken. Not only does this help students understand what is being asked of them, and in turn allowing them to get higher scores, but it also builds a relationship based around familiarity and could make students engage more in the material. Overall I really enjoyed this class and don’t think I will ever think about language and how we communicate with others the same. Even when I don’t mean to I acknowledge when I switch up my dialect when talking with my manager at Stamp versus a client versus one of my coworkers which I have never done before.