The Ethnocentricity of Good English

The concept that a person’s intelligence is directly proportional to that persons grammatic eloquence is both ridiculous. In Jon Simon’s Why Good English is Good for You, he bases his argument on why proper English is important on the proposed fact that a person’s psyche is molded by their ability to speak good English, directly targeting minorities and people of lower socioeconomic status. This proposition is archaic, offensive, and most of all ignorant. I’ve been speaking English all my life, and while I have noticed that being well versed in the English language is an important skill and the effect it has on thought, it most definitely is not the measure of a person’s intelligence.

Jon’s main argument in his paper is that the English language is slipping into turmoil, and because of this, society is as well. Jon says that if good English is taught to the underprivileged and the poor that “...the situation could improve enormously”. This is essentially blaming the social stratification present in our society on the fact that the underclass does not know how to speak proper English, which is preposterous. Why is there such a divide in the English language (and our society) to begin with? How did it get there? If the English language was really at the “...high level of excellence” that Jon says it is, then why do we have a stratification at all? The purpose of language is to communicate ideas between people. It should not discriminate between the people who speak it. If Standard English was the cure to all social issues, then improper English and proper English would be one and the same.

Another point that he brings up is the fact language is at the very core of how we think as people. He describes it as an “undercurrent—beneath what is going on.” While I will admit that language does affect the way thoughts are processed in the brain, it is not required to be an intelligent person. A person may be intelligent and not use proper English. Foreign scholars who learn English may speak improperly but still their minds are sound and their ideas are still beneficial to our society. There is nothing special about the English language that makes it inductive of intellectual thought. A language that can only be effective when being spoken at its highest form is not at a high level of excellence.

Jon seems to have a picture in his mind about how the world is divided, even bringing up the “two possible reactions” that a person could have to his argument. This essentially boils down to the question of how does language belong too? If language belonged to, and was controlled by the poets and the scholars, like Jon purposes, then a vast swath of people would be denied a say in its construction and modification. How could this be conducive to social unification in any way? Quarantining the responsibility and control of language on any one group will always create an impossible divide. The people who use the language every day, do not need or want an unambiguous, contrived language. The use of language in art no double has its place, but to think that it should have any control over language is absurd. A sculpture has no more control over the molecular structure of his marble, then a poet his language.

Correct English was not developed in a utopian vacuum. It stems from the same place in which societies issues have grown. Forcing Standard English on the lower class will not undo centuries of human oppression. This is a problem that is seeded in a place deeper than language. While communication is integral to fixing these issues, standard English will do us no good, if our ideals are misaligned. The divide will be there regardless of if there is a distinction between whom and who.

Quotes: The person who does not respect words and their proper relationships cannot have much respect for ideas—very possibly cannot have ideas at all. (end of P4)

Quote: To communicate without good English—is no more satisfactory than winning in a sport or game by accident or by disregarding the rules: which is really cheating. (end of P8)

Quote: Some things are so because tradition, usage, the best speakers and writers, the grammar books and dictionaries have made them so. (P10)

Quote: Compare bad English to nose picking. (P12 middle)

Quote: “…there is such a thing as Standard English, or purity of speech, or correctness of expression—something worth safeguarding and fostering; but how the devil is one to acoomplish that under the prevailing conditions: in a democratic society full of minorities that have their own dialects or linguistic preferences…” (P16)

Quote: …that more complex or elegant forms are obliged to yield to simpler or cruder ones… (middle P17)

Quote: …an English improvised by slaves and other strangers to the culture .. can nowise equal an English that the best literary and linguistic talents have...brought to a high level of excellence. (P22 end)

Quote: ..those are two very different groups of people (P23 middle) In refence to the poets and the common people.

Quote: “…the situation could improve enormaously”

Quote: At home you speak on way; here we have another language” (P27 end)

Quote: These directors—aborted playwrights, for the most part—will stage productions of Hamlet in which the prince is a woman, a flaming homosexual, or a one-eyed hunchback.