Myth education: Rationale and strategies for teaching against linguistic prejudice

Leah A. Zuidema

Literacy educators must work to combat prejudice by dispelling linguistic myths.

Language is a protective shield for prejudice—or ignorance. (MacNeil, 2003)

Linguistic prejudice is one of the few “acceptable” American prejudices. In polite society, we don’t allow jokes that we consider racist or sexist, and we are careful not to disparage a person’s religious beliefs. Language is another matter. In English With an Accent, Lippi-Green (1997) wrote,

[W]e regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world. You may have dark skin, we tell them, but you must not sound Black. You can wear a yarmulke if it is important to you as a Jew, but lose the accent. Maybe you come from the Ukraine, but can’t you speak real English? If you didn’t sound so corn-pone, people would take you seriously. You’re the best salesperson we’ve got, but must you sound so gay on the phone? (pp. 63–64)

Many of us feel free to make judgments about others because of the ways that they use language. We make assumptions based on the ways that people speak and write, presuming to know about their intelligence, their competence, their motives, and their morality (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999). As Davis (2001) explained, we assume that because we know a little about how people speak or write that we also understand “what they wear, what they eat, how they feel about certain things including birth, death, family, marriage and what they believe about the world and their place in it” (p. 1). We act as though dialects and accents are windows to people’s souls, and sometimes we dare to ignore or dismiss entire groups of people because of what we assume their linguistic habits reveal about them.

Employers might assume, for example, that an employee who speaks American English with a midwestern or northern accent is more intelligent (and thus more competent) than an employee who uses Appalachian English. Teachers might assume that a student who uses so-called standard English is more respectful of authority and more intelligent than a student who uses Ebonics. Landlords might assume that a person whose first language is English will take better care of a rental property than a tenant who speaks English with a Spanish accent.

These assumptions are not inconsequential thoughts. People act on their ideas, and, as a result, prejudice becomes active discrimination. Employment, promotions, grades, recommendations, and business agreements are just a few of the things that might be affected (negatively or positively) by reactions to the ways a person uses language in speech or writing. Even people who live—by choice or by happenstance—in relative isolation from racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural diversity might engage in linguistic prejudice.
Detrimental portrayals of language variation on the radio, on television, in films, and on the Internet all provide opportunities to cultivate negative attitudes, which can emerge as prejudicial judgments and behaviors when people encounter language variation in real life (whether on the telephone, in writing, or face to face). Individuals’ private prejudices might move them to take public action so that their condemning opinions are transformed into corporate policies; educational paradigms; and local, state, and federal laws—prejudice in practice, one might say.

Robert Phillipson called this “practical” prejudice *linguicism*, and his definition encompasses the process I have outlined. Linguicism is the assembly of “ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (as cited in Daly, 1995, para. 4). It is difficult to fight linguistic prejudice because the general public may be slow to condemn it or may even be skeptical about its existence because linguicism is such an insidious process. In addition, while most modern linguistics scholars acknowledge the existence of linguicism, their views have little influence on the general public (Smitherman, 2000). The burden of preventing linguicism and countering its effects must fall elsewhere.

Some literacy educators have, appropriately, taken up the challenge of teaching against linguistic prejudice. As Delpit (1998) argued, it is “possible and desirable to make the actual study of language diversity a part of the curriculum for all students” (p. 19). *Standards for the English Language Arts* (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996) stated that students should “develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.”

It is unfortunate that many schools and teachers have not incorporated such study into their curricula. Perhaps this shouldn’t be a surprise; after all, even the International Reading Association (IRA) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) devote relatively little attention to the need for all students to study language variation. For example, while IRA and NCTE publications and position statements emphasize teachers’ responsibilities to accept and accommodate diverse students’ languages, no official statements have been made about teaching students themselves to be accepting of linguistic diversity. Even the frequently cited (and recently reaffirmed) Conference on College Composition and Communication’s resolution *Students’ Right to Their Own Language* (1974) stops short of declaring the need to teach students about peoples’ rights to their own languages.

In a similar manner, a search of *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* issues dating back to May 2000 uncovered no articles focused on students’ attitudes toward or knowledge about linguistic diversity. The March 2001 themed issue of *English Journal* (titled “And Language for All”) includes several articles about teaching students whose own language is stigmatized, but it largely ignores the “mainstream” students. The exception is Wilson’s (2001) article on language study for preservice teachers. Wilson asserted, “Students who feel smug about their use of Standard English will benefit from understanding the linguistic strengths of speakers of other dialects” (p. 32). Aside from Wilson’s article, the issue is devoted entirely to students whose use of stigmatized language in speech and writing often results in their own marginalization. These students are, of course, deserving of a themed issue dedicated to their educational needs. But to ignore the “smug” students is a grave mistake, for these are the people who hold—or, as adults, will hold—much of the power that allows linguistic stigmatization and discrimination to continue.

**Teaching against myths**

If we really want to fight linguicism—and what Daniels (1983) referred to as “some of the basest
hatreds and flimsiest prejudices” (p. 9) that linguicism masks—we cannot leave the task to urban or so-called multicultural schools. All schools must heed the call to arms, and English language arts classrooms are among the most appropriate venues for taking action against linguicism. Because the classroom “is a major player in shaping language attitudes, and the classroom that is particularly crucial for the formation of ideas about language is that of the K–12 level” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 396), English language arts teachers should create opportunities to shape informed, positive student attitudes about language diversity for all students.

Helping adolescent learners create informed opinions about language diversity depends on educating them about the misinformation on this topic. This misinformation can be divided into three broad categories: myths about language, myths about others, and myths about the self. These myths can and should be addressed across the curriculum; for instance, social studies courses are well suited for confronting myths about others. Language study, however, needs to be the starting point and primary focus in English language arts courses. After all, studying language and its use (in writing, literature, and speech) is the principal discipline of the English language arts classroom. Dispelling some of the myths about language can result in a change of attitude toward others and the self.

Following are clarifications of some of the most persistent misconceptions about language, accompanied by strategies that can help students learn about the true nature of linguistic diversity. Instead of relying solely on lectures and readings, the activities are designed so that students can act as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p. 68). To facilitate this research process, students should collect samples of speech and writing throughout their study, choosing specimens that demonstrate both stigmatized and admired usages. Students can observe the language patterns of amateurs as well as language professionals such as teachers, politicians, media spokespersons, and published writers, and they can preserve their artifacts with pen and paper and audio or video recorder. As learners confront new ideas about language, they should examine their linguistic data collections in order to verify the truth for themselves. Not all students will subscribe to all language myths; it is important for teachers to discern which misconceptions are most prevalent among particular student groups and to shape the curriculum accordingly.

### Myth 1: English must obey the rules of grammar

Linguists would argue that this statement could be either true or false, depending on one’s definition of *grammar*. If, by *grammar*, one means the internal patterns that a given language naturally follows, or descriptions of these inherent patterns, then it is true. In English, for example, it is breaking the rules to attach an article after a noun (e.g., *Cat the in hat the*). Scholars did not gather at a conference to decide on this arrangement; no government established this pattern as a law. It is simply the way English works, and when people ignore this or other innate patterns of the language, it causes confusion. When we define *grammar* as the organic patterns of a language, or descriptions of these patterns, it is correct to state that English must obey grammatical rules.

Many nonlinguists, however, define *grammar* as the rules of taste (which linguists refer to as *usage*). Most people believe that observing the rules of taste is the same as knowing the grammar of a language. These prescriptive rules of taste assume great importance, so that many English speakers and writers are familiar with admonitions such as “Don’t say ‘ain’t,’” and “Ask ‘may I?’—I know that you can,” and “Don’t end a sentence with a preposition.” Most people will admit, however, that breaking these kinds of socially imposed rules does not actually impede anyone’s understanding of the message a person is attempting to communicate. When we define *grammar* as prescriptive standards of taste, it is
possible to say that English does not need to obey the rules in order to be effective.

Helping students to distinguish between the two definitions of grammar can be difficult, but I find that using an analogy is often effective. I prefer to use a discussion starter such as this one paraphrased from Lippi-Green (1997, p. 15): “A taxi must obey the laws of physics, but it can disobey state laws. How is English like a taxi?” Some students see the analogy right away; to help the others, I ask as many of the following questions as necessary:

- Is it possible for a taxi to disobey the laws of physics? What are the consequences of trying to break these laws? Who makes the laws of physics? How can these laws be changed?
- How is it possible for a taxi to disobey our state laws? Why might this happen? What are the consequences? Who makes our state laws? For what purposes? How can these laws be changed?
- How do state laws (as they pertain to taxis) differ from the laws of physics? Why are they different?
- In the English language, what are some rules that work in the same way that the laws of physics work for taxis? (We call these rules grammar.) What are the consequences of trying to break these grammar rules? Who makes the grammar rules of English? How can these grammar rules be changed?
- What are some English-language rules that work in the same way that state laws work for taxis? (We call these rules usage.) How is it possible to disobey these usage rules? Why might this happen? What are the consequences? Who makes usage rules? For what purposes? How can usage rules be changed?
- How does the analogy work? Is the analogy completely parallel? What are the limitations to the analogy?

A follow-up question such as “Who decides what is ‘good’ or ‘standard’ English?” helps students to consider the authority and motivations of those who control—or seek to control—language use.

It is important to introduce students to the distinctions between natural grammar and taste-based grammar early in efforts to teach against linguicism. Understanding that English must obey some kinds of grammar rules while having the freedom to disregard others is key to correcting other common misconceptions about language variation.

**Myth 2: Some dialects and languages don’t have grammatical rules**

This is an argument that is frequently used to disparage stigmatized language systems such as Ebonics, Appalachian English, and Hawaiian Creole English. Instead of viewing these systems as patterned and rule governed, many people call them “slang” or “street talk” or resort to cruel labels that show blatant disrespect for the speakers themselves. The best way for students to learn that stigmatized languages and dialects really are rule governed is to discover it for themselves through a series of guided activities.

Wolfram et al. (1999) developed an excellent sequence, “Illustrative Exercises of Grammatical Patterning,” to help adolescent learners ascertain the logical, rule-governed nature of such configurations as the *a-* prefix used in some Southern dialects and the invariant *be* from Ebonics. For example, in exercises on the use of the *a-* prefix, students examine matched sentence pairs and use their intuition to answer questions such as, “Does it sound better to say, ‘A-building is hard work’ or ‘He was a-building a house?’” After analyzing a number of similar sentence pairs, learners are prompted to determine which inherent patterns or rules govern the use of the prefix. Whether students speak the mainstream English that some linguists refer to as the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) or...
rely primarily on stigmatized dialects or languages, exercises in grammatical patterning help them to realize that all language systems are rule governed. Understanding this concept helps students to see through false (but common) claims about the supposed stupidity or laziness of those who use stigmatized dialects and languages. In addition, realizing that speaking a prestigious variety or dialect of a language (e.g., being a literal smooth talker) does not make a person more intelligent or hard working reminds learners about the folly of assigning credibility to a source based only on that person’s use of language.

Language-patterning exercises can convince students that systems such as Appalachian English do indeed have organic grammatical rules, but some learners may fail to realize that stigmatized languages and dialects also observe their own taste-based rules of grammar. The challenge for teachers is to find ways for students to observe or experience the rich complexities of dialects and languages that are unfamiliar to them. Ideally, students would interview speakers fluent in LWC as well as a stigmatized system such as Appalachian English, asking the speakers to provide examples of the ways that they adjust their pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax when they are using the dialect for varied audiences and contexts.

**RECOMMENDED READINGS ON THE GRAMMAR, VOCABULARY, AND RHETORIC OF EBUSNICS AND OTHER STIGMATIZED LANGUAGE SYSTEMS**


In addition to discussing strategies for teaching writing to Ebonics speakers, this chapter outlines 15 rhetorical features that occur frequently in Ebonics discourse. Examples of these rhetorical features include rhythmic language, proverbs, and sermonic tone.


The authors systematically discuss the grammar of Ebonics, making frequent and helpful use of excerpts from actual conversations to explain the rules for plurals, possessives, pronouns, tense, and more.


Smitherman’s dictionary goes beyond cataloging definitions: It also provides history, opinions about the role of Ebonics in American education and culture, and an emphasis on significant words and phrases.


Smitherman, a respected scholar of Ebonics who frequently uses Ebonics grammar, vocabulary, and rhetoric in her academic writing, argues for defining Ebonics as a language and traces its historical development.


The authors focus on pronunciation and grammatical structures, commenting on linguistic patterns and how they are manifested in a number of varieties of English. For example, in a section on “Final Cluster Reduction,” the authors explain how and why “best apple” can become “bes’ apple” in Ebonics as well as Hispanic English and Vietnamese English.
It is unfortunate that time, geography, and other factors frequently prevent such interviews, but students can still have opportunities to see and hear the patterned, complex nature of several varieties of English in documentaries such as The Story of English (Cran, 1997) or its sequel series, Do You Speak American? (Cran, 2005). The film American Tongues (Alvarez & Kolker, 1986) is nearly 20 years old, but it too engages students who are trying to understand that all American varieties of English are governed by natural as well as taste-based grammars. Teaching literature that incorporates accurate portrayals of specific dialects, particularly if they are used for a range of audiences and situations, is also an effective means for students to learn more about the grammaticality of stigmatized language systems and about the code-switching techniques employed by many speakers of stigmatized languages. For examples of literary characters discussing the ways they shift—or are expected to shift—their language use for various audiences, see chapter 6 of A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines (1993) or chapter 12 of To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee (1960/1988).

**Myth 3: Standard English is better than other varieties**

Learners who understand the fallacies of the first two myths are also prepared to unpack this third myth. They acknowledge that judgments about “good” and “bad” language use are subjective social constructions. They recognize the falsehood in the argument that nonstandard varieties don’t have “rules” or are random and therefore worthless. However, this complex myth also hinges on other misconceptions that need to be addressed.

One of these errors is the belief that good English is the everyday spoken language of the most educated and intelligent people. Most LWC speakers recognize that their own language use does not often meet the ideals of so-called standard English. However, many of these same speakers also believe that with enough education and practice, they—like educated speakers “somewhere else”—will be able to let loose a flurry of grammatically perfect prose every time they open their mouths. In actuality, standard English is an abstract ideal based not on speech but on the model of written language (Lippi-Green, 1997).

One way for students to investigate this idea is by analyzing their collected speech and writing samples to determine which ones are most likely to showcase formal standard English. Learners soon discover that the best English is usually found in writing and in speech based on writing, such as news broadcasts. Students also should analyze the differences between their own written and spoken language patterns. These activities help students to understand that most people, no matter how well educated, cannot hope to consistently speak with the polish of revised and edited writing—the kind of language use which is idealized as standard.

Another problem with the myth that standard English is good English is that standard English is a moving target. Wolfram et al. (1999) explained, “There is really no single dialect of English that corresponds to a standard English.... The norms for standard English are not identical in all communities. Furthermore, there are two sets of norms—the informal standard and the formal standard” (pp. 14–15). Students need to realize that no matter how standard their English is, all speakers are perceived by some listeners to have an accent. Learners can research the moving target concept by contrasting what a variety of sources (including dictionary and textbook writers) mean when they refer to standard English.

Most students know intuitively that formal standard English is not the best choice for every communicative situation, yet they are so used to having their own grammar corrected that they cannot help but believe that nonstandard English is bad. Need evidence? Consider how often teens and even adults use perfectly appropriate conventions of casual conversation and then, remembering they are speaking with English teachers, apologize in embarrassment for their “bad
grammar.” Baron (1990) rightly stated, “We must own up to the fact that the teaching of English to speakers of English has promoted much of the linguistic insecurity and fear of grammar that we observe today” (pp. 211–212). It is important for students to hear English teachers acknowledging that a nonstandard register or even another dialect or language is sometimes the most appropriate and effective choice. Hearing the message isn’t enough; students also need opportunities to consciously explore and reflect with their teachers about effective uses of systems other than formal standard English.

Smith (2001) suggested an activity that is useful to this end. Smith instructs his students to research and write about the unique vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and other linguistic features of the speech communities in which they participate. Students may choose communities defined by vocation, age, interests, beliefs, gender, or other identifying features. Smith explained that this assignment helps students see that just because a speech community is different or unique does not make it “wrong,” dumb, or stupid. My students discovered they all took part in different speech communities with special linguistic forms unique to their group, age, gender, occupation, geography, situation, etc.

As they strive to appreciate the value of certain nonstandard uses of language, some learners also benefit from experiencing what it means for ideas to be lost in translation. Students should select information that they would normally discuss in their unique speech communities and “translate” the information into the vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax of another less familiar speech community. To help LWC speakers gain an even greater appreciation for the pressures that speakers of stigmatized language systems face when they are pressured to conform to unfamiliar varieties of English, student volunteers may attempt—perhaps before an audience, if they are willing—to do their translating orally or in a timed, unrevised writing. For a less intimidating approach, introduce students to literature that portrays the difficulties of learning and translating from another language to English, such as An Na’s young adult novel A Step From Heaven (2001) or many of Pat Mora’s poems in My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems for Young Adults (2000)—particularly “Learning English: Chorus in Many Voices.” Reflection upon these kinds of translating activities with analytical discussion helps students to recognize that the worth of a given language system is tied to its appropriateness and effectiveness for a given context, purpose, and audience, not to inherent qualities such as syntax.

Myth 4: English is not as good as it used to be, and it is getting worse

“There seems to be a widespread feeling that the English language is a fragile object and is constantly under siege,” wrote Wolfram et al. (1999, p. 100). Some students may argue that acknowledging the value of stigmatized language systems will change the English language, eventually resulting in its decline or loss. Students are correct to notice that English—like other “live” languages—is constantly changing. Some words or phrases become linguistic fads; others fall into disuse or “misuse.” Rules of taste change, and the pronunciations, uses, conjugations, and spellings of words are altered over time to adjust to new contexts, speakers, purposes, and audiences. We call this adaptability “survival of the fittest” when we discuss other kinds of evolution; it is evidence of the resilience of language and not a matter for concern.

Students need to see for themselves that changes in language and language standards are evidence of flexibility and no cause for worry. One way to make this possible is for learners to examine parallel texts in Old English, Middle English, and early and recent Modern English (Wolfram et al., 1999). (See, for example, Catherine Ball’s webpage tracing historical translations of “The Lord’s Prayer” at www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/oe/pater_noster.html.)
Learning about the history of English, including its interaction with French, Latin, Ebonics, Hawaiian Creole English, and Spanish, also helps students to understand how and why the language changes; the documentary *The Story of English* (Cran, 1997) is useful in this regard. Students who harbor doubts that English can survive change may be convinced by Daniels’s (1983) humorous, instructive chapter “Something New and Ominous,” which relates highlights from “the history of linguistic insecurity and intolerance and the periods of [erroneous] doomsaying which they regularly generate” (p. 33). Examples from Daniels’s chapter can help students to see that worries about language decline are not new, and that changes and flexibility are what help to keep English alive and thriving.

**Teaching against the miseducation of myth education**

It is not enough to dispel widely held myths about language variation; we also need to expose how myths and misconceptions are perpetuated so that students can participate in efforts to resist, subvert, and combat linguicism. Lippi-Green (1997) wrote a blistering indictment of the powerful institutions that enable “language subordination”:

> Standard language ideology is introduced by the schools, vigorously promoted by the media, and further institutionalized by the corporate sector. It is underscored by the entertainment industry and underwritten in subtle and not so subtle ways by the judicial system. (p. 73)

It is imperative that students learn to identify and critique prejudicial portrayals of languages, dialects, speakers, and writers. Projects such as the following provide opportunities for learners to conduct primary-source research and critical analysis of real-life attitudes toward linguistic diversity.

Students can examine music lyrics, radio broadcasts, television shows, films, entertainment magazines, novels, Internet sites, and video games to uncover the prejudices of particular segments of the entertainment industry. Lippi-Green (1997) outlined her students’ research of negative portrayals of language variation in Disney animated films in her chapter “Teaching Children How to Discriminate: What We Learn from the Big Bad Wolf.” This chapter works well as a model for adolescent learners researching the ways in which pop culture sources link stigmatized as well as admired language varieties with people’s abilities, morals, attractiveness, and so on.

Students can collect samples of linguistic prejudice propagated by the news media in television, Internet, and radio news commentary as well as in printed editorials (Wilson, 2001). Students can also record instances when the news media present myths as truths instead of checking the scientific facts with actual linguists. I’ve found Morris’s (1998) article “Toward Creating a TV Research Community in Your Classroom” to be an especially helpful resource for designing media-based, primary-source research projects with high school and college students.

Students can interview employers and their employees, as well as “personnel officers in actual workplaces about their attitudes toward divergent styles in oral and written language” (Delpit, 1998, p. 44). Another option is for students to create written surveys that people can complete anonymously. Students can use their findings to debate the legality and implications of responses to linguistic diversity in the workplace. To complicate the debate, teachers may wish to share the results of research indicating that some listeners show a decreased ability to understand a person when they believe (based on appearance) that the speaker is of an ethnicity other than their own (Lippi-Green, 1997). Students might also be surprised to learn that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Guidelines on Discrimination Because of National Origin outlaw “denial of equal employment opportunity” based on an individual’s use of “linguistic characteristics of a national origin” (as cited in Lippi-Green,
p. 153). The exception (per the Civil Rights Act of 1964) is when “an individual’s accent...interferes materially with job performance” (as cited in Lippi-Green, p. 154). Also, students may be interested to know that workplace discrimination based on an individual’s regional (versus national) linguistic origin is not prohibited by law.

Students can research court cases concerning discrimination that stems from linguistic prejudice. Lippi-Green (1997) outlined several of these cases in her chapter “Language Ideology in the Workplace and the Judicial System.” She found that the judges “were willing to depend on their own expertise in matters of language in a way they would never presume to in matters of genetics, or mechanical engineering, or psychology” (p. 160). Students can test Lippi-Green’s claim about the behaviors of judges or look at the impact of judicial decisions on discrimination laws or employment and education policies. They might also investigate efforts to pass laws making English the official language of the United States, evaluating the rhetoric and rationale behind such policies as well as the implications of English-only legislation. Students can begin with an investigation into U.S. English, Inc., one of the main proponents of the English-only movement, at www.us-english.org. Counterarguments to the English-only movement are presented on the NCTE website in the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s position statement on the National Language Policy at www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/div/107643.htm.

Students can consider the roles of schools in perpetuating linguistic prejudice. Opening our own practices for critique takes courage, trust, and careful leadership. If we partner with our students to go beyond critique—if we take action with them in changing our scholastic responses to language variation—we can communicate more clearly than in any other project we pursue together that we are committed to teaching and acting against linguistic prejudice.

Taking positive action

Students are sure to make disturbing findings in research projects such as these. We can help students to take positive action in response to their learning and make their research efforts more consequential by offering writing assignment options that work toward eliminating the propagation of linguistic prejudice and the practice of language-based discrimination. Students can compose fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction that reflect on linguicism; they can write articles that expose linguistic prejudice; and they can write letters, proposals, public service announcements, and other documents that seek to combat linguicism. Publishing students’ writings or delivering them to the intended audiences can empower students as activists in their world and make their learning meaningful in a way that writing for the teacher alone cannot do.

The ubiquitous problem of linguistic prejudice deserves significant attention in all schools. We ought to incorporate language study at all levels in freestanding units or in partnership with literature, grammar, speech, and composition studies. While language study is not likely to eradicate language-based discrimination, it may serve to diminish our students’ and our own willingness to use language “as both a channel and an excuse for expressing some of our deepest prejudices” (Daniels, 1983, p. 5). Consistent, widespread education about the true nature of language may help to put an end to popular regard for linguicism as one of the last “acceptable” prejudices.

REFERENCES


Conference on College Composition and Communication. (1974, Fall). Students’ right to their own language.


