



Linguistic Prejudice, Linguistic Privilege

Public Forum

Wednesday, March 29, 2017 6:30-8:00pm 19 W. 4th St, Room 101

From the sounds of speech to the construction of sentences to nuances in meaning, a hallmark of human language is its diversity. While linguists believe that this diversity has much to teach us about human cognition, creativity, and identity, it has also been long observed that differences in language use among social groups have led to discrimination against speakers who diverge from the dominant group. Linguistic prejudice has been documented against many different (but often intersecting) groups, including racial or ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, speakers of regional dialects, non-native speakers, and on the basis of gender. Indeed, linguistic prejudice seems to remain socially acceptable today even when other types of overt discrimination are otherwise shunned. This forum brings together four scholars from the Department of Linguistics at NYU whose research addresses these issues.

- Laurel MacKenzie: The Myth of Standard English
- Lisa Davidson: Talking While Female: The Science & Censure of Women's Voices
- Gregory Guy: Life and Language at the Back of the Classroom: Linguistic Minorities in Educational Settings
- Renée Blake: Don't CALL me what I AM!: On being BLACK and ARTICULATE

Moderated by John Singler, Professor Emeritus

#LPLPNYU

Life and Language at the Back of the Classroom:
Linguistic Minorities in Educational Settings

Gregory R. Guy



C.W. Henry School Philadelphia

Life and Language at the Back of the Classroom:
Linguistic Minorities in Educational Settings

A lot of media and social attention has been paid over the years to the observation that children of minority ethnic backgrounds, especially Black and Latino children, on average tend to underperform in American schools. There's been a lot of public discussion and academic research on this problem, and a broad array of policies, programs, remedial education initiatives, etc. that seek to address it. Now obviously there are a lot of things that contribute to this outcome, ranging from residential segregation and underfunded schools, to outright racism. But linguistic prejudice, the topic of this panel is clearly a major contributor, and one that has gotten little to no attention.

Schools, standardized tests, and educational systems in general are among the foremost advocates and guardians of the 'standard language' myth that Professor MacKenzie has just been talking about. Students are constantly perceived, evaluated and graded on the basis of their language, and the ruler that they are compared to is the so-called standard. Kids whose speech and writing do not conform to this variety are marked down. They get poorer grades, they get tracked into less challenging programs and subjects, they are

considered to be less bright or academically capable. Now there are many teachers who are aware of this implicit linguistic prejudice, and can see past the differences in language to the student's actual intelligence and creativity, even if differently expressed. But even if the teacher approaches the child this way, the larger educational institutions do not. The standards of evaluation imposed by school systems and standardized tests overwhelmingly converge on requirements that the student can produce in the standard language variety. Failure to speak and write "correctly" is taken as a personal failure: the kid just doesn't have the initiative, or the commitment, or the intellect to master the subject.

So let's consider what this means in social terms. The most basic observation of linguistic science is that every child, every human being, achieves perfect mastery of the language that they hear spoken to them in childhood, by their parents and peers, in their family and neighborhood. If they're exposed to two or more languages, they will learn them all. This is a human talent that we all share. This is what it means to be a native speaker. Everybody is going to grow up talking just like the people that they talk TO.

So this means that every child is going to come to school speaking the way their families and neighbors speak. If the people they have grown up with speak Spanish, the kid speaks Spanish. And if your parents spoke something like standard English, you speak that way. But if your parents, friends, and neighbors spoke a different variety of English, say African-American English, that's what you speak too. Speaking the way your family speaks does not show that you are smart or stupid, or that you lack or possess the capacity to learn and do well in school, it just means that you're human. So when children are evaluated and graded on the basis of the way they speak, on the variety of English they bring to the classroom, what's being graded is their family and community, not their individual talents. Since 'standardness' is defined by the usage of the socially powerful, kids from affluent white families will automatically get good grades on 'language arts': this is linguistic privilege. But if you come from a community that has been stigmatized and marginalized and has a different way of speaking, you will be judged as academically deficient, and consigned, literally or figuratively, to the back of the classroom. This is linguistic prejudice.

Now rather than just talk about privilege and prejudice in the abstract, I want to put a human face on all this. I want to tell you a story from my own personal experience.

I grew up in Philadelphia in a neighborhood which was racially and socially diverse and integrated, and I attended the neighborhood public school for eight years. My classmates and friends were ethnically diverse, but the majority were African Americans. Throughout my childhood, most of the cool kids and popular kids and talented and respected kids among my classmates and playmates and friends were black. The varieties of English that the kids came to school speaking were also diverse; I spoke a white middle class variety that approximates the privileged 'standard', the Ecuadorean kids spoke a version of what has been called Latino English, and most of the Black kids spoke some variety of African American English. But of course these are names that we give to

these varieties as adults and academics. In the schoolyard, these were varieties that we associated with individuals: the way that Greg spoke or Eduardo spoke or Darryl spoke.

My best friend in the middle school years was Darryl. He and I played together and did homework together. We went to museums together: the Franklin Institute, which is a big science museum, where we were thrilled by the planetarium and the human heart exhibit. On my tenth birthday we went to the museum of the University of Pennsylvania, where we were blown away by the Egyptian mummies and sarcophaguses. Our shared fascination with science and history was one of the bases of our friendship.

Among our peer-group, Darryl was a verbal superstar. He was quick-witted, eloquent, funny. In the schoolyard, when people started sounding – the humorous insult game that is common in many African-American communities – Darryl would come up with put-downs that would leave everyone howling with laughter. I, on the other hand, was a stone lame at this.

But in the classroom, things were different. Darryl is black, and I'm white. As we grew older, the social and racial divides of American society began to penetrate our little world, and language was a principle medium by which this occurred. I had the genetic good fortune to be born into a middle class white family, and was therefore a linguistic golden boy to our teachers. Darryl was from a working class black family, and had the linguistic traits we call African American English, so he was subjected to what, in retrospect, I think of as a form of linguistic child abuse.

More than a few of our teachers would torture Darryl and the other black kids about their use of African American English characteristics. They targeted his omitted copulas, like “He happy” instead of “he’s happy”. They mocked his negative concord, saying things like “You don’t know nothing” instead of “you don’t know anything”. One thing they particularly nailed him on had to do with pronunciation: like many black Americans, and even many white speakers from the South, Darryl had a merger of the vowels in *pin* and *pen*: both of these were pronounced the same; he said *pin and pin*, *chimical*, *pincil*, *sinsitive*, etc. We had one teacher who would drill Darryl and our black classmates on *pin/pen*. It went like this:

Ms. Kelly:	Say ‘pin’.
Darryl:	‘Pin’
Ms. K.	Say ‘pen’
Darryl:	‘pin’
Ms. K.:	No you said it wrong, I said pen and you said pin.

Now linguists have done a lot of work on speech perception which shows that people hear sounds based on the phonological categories of their native language. There’s a phenomenon known as ‘categorical perception’: you don’t tend to hear gradual phonetic differences between sounds; instead you map what you hear straight into the phonemes of your language. So Darryl had one phoneme where Ms Kelly had two, so his experience of this exchange was probably the following:

Say pin – pin. Say pin – pin. ‘no you’re wrong I said pin and you said pin’.

Undergoing this kind of stupid and humiliating exercise day after day, Darryl probably concluded that Miss Kelly was simply a crazy old lady out to get him, perhaps with a racial subtext: a white lady telling a black boy he was either contrary or stupid.

Now what’s the rational person going to do in such circumstances? Darryl’s parents, pastor, grandparents, brothers and sisters, all the people he loved and respected, spoke the way he did. So is he gonna take the word of Ms Kelly about how to talk? As a normal well adjusted human being, probably not. More likely he concludes that school is not for him: the system just doesn’t like him.

The long term implications of the school playing linguistic favorites were also pernicious. In eighth grade, a sorting took place, as students were tracked towards different high-schools. As a good student with what the school labeled good language, I was selected for the academic high school, and ended up a university professor. But Darryl had a different outcome. He was as smart and articulate and fascinated by science as I was, he helped me solve homework problems as much as I helped him, but he spoke differently, and he was shuffled off to a vocational high-school and ended up becoming a car mechanic. This was white privilege, sustained by institutional linguistic prejudice, clear and ugly.

One thing about this process that is particularly destructive is that it PRETENDS to be an unbiased assessment of your ability to master a subject. Every kid comes to school not knowing math, science, and history, and so they start their studies of those subjects from the same point. But language is different: I came to school already speaking the standard, so I had a huge head-start over the black and Latino kids. One pernicious aspect of the ‘standard language’ myth is that it is portrayed as just another set of knowledge that everyone must acquire, socially neutral in the same way that science and math do not favor one ethnic group over another. So my AAE speaking classmates were told that they were getting the short end of the stick not because the system was built to favor speakers like me, but because they were personally inadequate.

Back then, when I was a child, it was clear to all of us kids that this shit was wrong! But at that age, we were powerless to do anything about it, and didn’t even have the words to articulate WHAT was wrong. As adults, we have the ability and the obligation to understand how this is wrong, and to do something about it. As a linguist I can bring my professional expertise and scientific evidence to bear on the issue, to name linguistic prejudice for what it is, to speak out against what happened to Darryl then and continues to happen to children from linguistic minorities today. The variety that I and my family speak, the so-called standard, is NOT intrinsically superior or beautiful or logical or expressive, and it is not just another school subject. Rather it is just a language variety like any other, whose ‘standardness’ comes from the social power of its native speakers. Discrimination against those who happen not to speak it natively is prejudice, plain and simple.