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Language Equity in the Undergraduate Classroom: Fostering Language Diversity in the World of Standard Academic English

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore the complex intersection of language, identity, and education with a particular focus on the importance of fostering linguistic equity in higher education settings. It is imperative for higher education institutions to reevaluate language-related practices and foster linguistic diversity and equity. Drawing upon linguistic theories and real-world examples, I highlight how language is deeply intertwined with personal identity, culture, and heritage. Various English dialects, such as African American Vernacular English, Chicano English, and others, are highlighted as valid linguistic expressions rather than deviations from a supposed standard. The role of standard academic English (SAE) in academia is examined, with a critical examination of how it can unintentionally perpetuate linguistic prejudice and inequality. I highlight activities in one university and provide practical strategies and classroom approaches to promote linguistic equity by showcasing rubric adjustments and teaching techniques that accommodate diverse language backgrounds. Educators can create inclusive learning environments that empower students to communicate effectively and celebrate their linguistic diversity, ultimately breaking free from historically biased language standards.

Keywords: *linguistic equity, language diversity, dialects, language identity, Standard Academic English, SAE, linguistic prejudice, linguistic justice, teaching strategies, cultural/personal identity*

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Introduction

A meme attributed to a page called Opulent Opinions (which no longer seems to exist) made the rounds through social media. It stated,

If someone's meaning is clear, don't correct their spelling or grammar. If their meaning isn't clear, ask for clarification without correcting their spelling or grammar. Start to decondition yourself from the colonial grammar rules that were forcibly ingrained in you. Those systems exist to invisibly reinforce hierarchy. Unlearn the need to police those rules, especially when the rules do nothing to enhance comprehension.

The meme created a lot of discussion and controversy in every space in which it was shared. Some people felt that agreeing meant that society would fall victim to misunderstandings and chaos by ignoring the established grammar and spelling rules. In contrast, others stood with the message behind the picture: those rules are arbitrary, established by one group to the exclusion of others. On both ends of the spectrum, opinions were stated strongly and passionately.

Academics are conditioned to teach students to use what they have been taught as proper spelling and grammar to prepare students for academic writing by making sure they speak and write in ways that communicate professionalism and in ways we have come to define as being *educated*. To this end, educators have used strategies, including incorporating sections in rubrics that assign point values to how well students use the established spelling and grammar rules in graded tasks. However, what if penalizing students for what we consider poor grammar and spelling is more harmful to their learning than beneficial, especially in early undergraduate courses? What if doing so denies their identity and creates barriers to equality and justice in higher education classrooms?

Emerging Trends and Reactions

The terms *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion*, and *belonging* (DEIB) are familiar to most people. Organizations have been implementing strategies for DEIB since the late 1960s to respond to the civil rights movement. However, several factors, including changing demographics in the United States, the social unrest following the killings of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, and the inequalities underscored by the COVID-19 crisis, forced institutions and organizations to take a closer look at internal DEIB practices and outcomes (Benson, 2021). Across the higher learning community, 2021 became a critical year for renewed examination into what colleges and universities do to ensure equitable and achievable education for all students. One of the areas that equity in academics must examine is how language use affects students, particularly students of color.

Linguists understand language as an integral part of identity because language is developed at home and within the culture in which someone is raised and is a significant part of who we are (Lippi-Green, 2011). My first language is Spanish. My accent when I speak English tells the world that I speak more than one language and that I grew up in a Latino culture. Less obvious is that I also grew up speaking French. My multilingualism means that sometimes I confuse prepositions or have difficulty pronouncing certain words in English. Being Latina means I see the world in a certain way, including how I manage language. I tend to communicate more directly than my White, Southern sister-in-law, for example, and when I lived in the South, I was often called assertive at best and opinionated at worst. Furthermore, while people are not a monolith, who I am is rooted mainly in my cultural and linguistic background.

Home language and identity are significantly tied. Anzaldua (1987), a Chicana scholar, poet, and activist, described the pain of the lack of acknowledgment of one's home language in these words, "So if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 59). Since linguistic identity permeates every aspect of a person's life, educators need to understand the impact of home language on their students' learning.

However, the word *language* tends to be understood narrowly. Generally, people consider language a national, official, global tongue. If asked to give examples of languages, they will likely say Spanish, French, English, Russian, and others. A broader definition of language offered by Crystal and Robins (2024) is “a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves” (p. 1). They continue the definition as “a system of communication used by a particular country *or community*” (author’s emphasis).

English is the national language and the primary spoken language in the United States and the language in which colleges and universities conduct courses. However, while we have been taught to think of English as the national language of the United States, linguistic researchers acknowledge that there are many different dialects of English with their own consistent and complex grammar rules, unique vocabulary, and pronunciations (Lavob, 1972; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998). The one more commonly recognized is standard English (SE) (Lavob, 1973; Pullum, 1999), but among those dialects are also African American vernacular English, Chicano English, and Appalachian English. In fact, recent research outlined the emergence of the Miami dialect, which is now considered a new English dialect (Carter & D’Alessandro Merii, 2023). This dialect is the product of an immigrant group (Cubans) becoming the local majority and, over time, deeply shaping the region’s language.

When held against the definitions of language, the commonalities between global languages and dialects are clear. The dialect someone grew up speaking at home is, for that person, the language of their identity. Nevertheless, these dialects are often thought of as English spoken wrongly when the reality is that they do not adhere to the grammar and spelling rules of SE. This understanding of *correct* English means that the habits of standard English, its rules, and its syntax, are seen as the best, clearest, and most effective ways to communicate (Inoue, 2021). Saying that someone *sounds* educated means that they are fluent in SE rather than referencing the person’s degrees. That has created stereotypes that predominantly affect people of color and non-English natives in the United States. They are seen as less communicative, intelligent, coherent, and clear (Inoue, 2021).

Reckoning With Standard Academic English

Higher education in the United States was established with the founding of Harvard in 1636 for the education of the White European men who colonized this land, and, until the early 20th century, college was mostly for the elite (Snyder, 1993). The men who would later lead the revolution to shed British rule and found an independent nation came out of these higher education institutions and imposed their views on how the new country should be run. It is not surprising that Inoue (2021) claimed that what we know today as SE is the version of English that evolved from the language habits and structures of the same people in power when this country was founded: White, middle, and upper-class monolingual men from New England or the East Coast. Their English dialect became what is now understood as SE and the dialect used in academic environments (Chun et al., 2019). Academic language evolved from there. It is often referred to as SAE to specify its context. Garcia and Solorza (2021, p. 506) asserted that “academic language can be considered a historical progression of the ideological invention of language by European elites” who used language as a tool of colonialism and nation-building. The modern version of academic language is, hence, “a natural extension of this historical model of exclusion” (Garcia & Solorza, 2021, p. 506). Lippi-Green (2011) described the type of English favored in academic settings today as “markedly non-middle class, middle American, and colorless” (p. 96).

Unfortunately, even in the name *standard*, there is an assumption that this form of English is accessible to all “non-normative, White, middle-class, monolingual English speakers” (Inoue, 2021, p. 15). Some students have more access to the habits of SAE because they speak SE English at home. This gives them an unfair advantage over those students who speak a different dialect of English at home when they enter college

classrooms, leading to diminished educational opportunities. While part of university faculty's charge is to teach every student SAE so they have choices and the options and opportunities available to them, including pursuing higher degrees, instructors cannot forget that some students are, in essence, learning a new language and code-switching (adjusting one's persona for the comfort of others) or code-meshing ("the practice of braiding or blending languages, discourses, and rhetorical traditions within a single text"; Green & Condon, 2020, p. 277) when they enter the classroom. This may mean changing the way we talk, dress, and behave to receive better treatment and equal opportunities (McCluney et al., 2019).

Another byproduct of using SAE as the universal dialect of academia is that, as universities continue the practice of centering SAE as the accepted academic language, they can be sites of linguistic discrimination, the "ideologies and practices that are utilized to conform, normalize, and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users" (De Costa, 2020, p. 2). To amplify the issue, while DEIB departments in institutions of higher learning have developed efforts to ensure equity on issues of race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other areas, language discrimination is often missing from these efforts (Wolfram, 2023). Lippi-Green (2011) argued that the lack of representation of linguistic diversity in DEIB programs has to do with the fact that linguistic prejudice is commonly accepted and perceived as appropriate and that languages and speakers that differ from the norm are considered subordinate.

A Case Study of Linguistic Diversity Efforts

If one subscribes to the idea that a student's home language is tied to their identity and that there is value in having diverse language perspectives in the classroom, institutions of higher learning have the challenge to combat linguistic prejudice and discrimination and foster linguistic equity and diversity. The institution where I work, Walden University, serves non-traditional students, primarily adults between the ages of 30 and 50. Seventy-eight percent of our students are employed full-time or self-employed, and 45% received a Pell Grant in Fall 2020 (Walden University, n.d). Students come from all 50 states and 117 different countries; almost half of the students are students of color (38% of undergraduates are Black and 10% Hispanic or Latino, while 41% of graduate students are Black and 9% are Hispanic or Latino; Walden, 2024). Walden University is a broad-access institution offering admission to any student who has earned a high school diploma or equivalent and is at least 21 years of age or older, with some exceptions for special cases such as active members of the military and students who have at least 12 quarter credit hours of college credit (Walden Student Handbook, 2024). As a result, Walden students come from a variety of backgrounds, are fluent in a variety of languages and dialects, and present with a wide range of academic skills.

Thus, it is important at this institution specifically to engage thoughtfully with DEIB affairs, including understanding and fostering linguistic diversity and fighting linguistic prejudice. One of the ways institutions can foster linguistic diversity and combat linguistic prejudice is to overtly convey respect for multilingualism (Page, 2023). Student-facing statements in syllabi and other communications are an effective place to start. For example, the writing center's mission and values demonstrate what fostering linguistic equity can look like in a diversity and inclusion statement.

All students have the right to learn in an environment where diversity and inclusion is a valued asset and integral part of the community. Moreover, we recognize and value the perspectives that traditionally marginalized groups bring to our community, and we aim to learn from each student's historical, cultural, and lived experiences. One of our goals as writing center professionals and members of a university community dedicated to social change is to encourage students to realize their power to effect social change through research and practice. We recognize that our students' knowledge of global languages and plural Englishes is vital to their critical awareness. (Walden University, 2016)

The university incorporates language diversity and equity concepts and conversations into undergraduate faculty orientation to help new faculty better understand the unique needs of non-traditional adult online undergraduates and the philosophy of language equity.

Faculty in training are provided with resources to help them reflect on the topic, and then they participate in a discussion on linguistic diversity with other newly hired instructors. The discussion focuses on how to incorporate students' languages and variants into their classrooms and whether there are certain spaces better suited to foster language equity than others, such as the discussion forum or the Class Café, where students introduce themselves when the course begins.

Classroom Strategies

Every undergraduate classroom at the university contains a student-facing document called the Academic Writing Expectations (AWE), which outlines what academic writing skills a student should be expected to demonstrate according to the course level. Regardless of the level, the expression *grammar and spelling errors* has been replaced with *grammar and spelling deviations from SAE* (Inoue, 2015) to acknowledge that standard English is one of the possible Englishes available to students rather than the *right* or *only* version of English. Students learn to use SAE as a tool to communicate with instructors and other students in an academic setting. Some departments have taken this philosophy of fostering language equity one step further. For example, the School of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Studies (SIUS), which hosts most general education courses, operationalized the AWE by creating rubric sections for format and writing that mirror the wording of the document. Below is the “Format and Writing” section of a discussion rubric for a 1000-level course where the term “errors” has been replaced with “deviations” to mark writing that does not comply with SAE but may be appropriate for different dialects.

Format and Writing

Any spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation deviations from Standard Academic English are minor and do not affect clear communication.

Posts contain few spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation deviations from Standard Academic English, OR these deviations do not affect clear communication.

Multiple spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation deviations from Standard Academic English affect clear communication.

The spelling and grammar deviations from SAE are penalized to the extent that they obscure meaning and detract from clear communication. This section of the rubric does not amount to more than 10–15 percent of the total points for the discussion or assignment. Most points are spent on whether the student read the material, analyzed the information, wrote a logical, precise response, and used critical thinking skills. If they can express that without perfect adherence to SAE, it is important to reward them for their strengths without punishing their deficits. Of course, faculty can continue to help students develop their SAE skills by pointing them to tools like Grammarly, modeling their writing as they respond and interact with students, referring them to the writing center, and talking to them in terms of learning SAE. Students still need to develop SAE skills.

Another critical strategy is to teach students that different writing contexts require different versions of English. Whitney (2005) recommended teaching students the skill of code-switching, which she defined as “the ability to choose the language variety appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose” (p. 67). Code-switching can help students understand that while their home language is valued, it is only appropriate in specific contexts. In addition, teaching students to consider their audience as they write

will help them make appropriate rhetorical choices. For example, when they write a discussion in an online course, the audience is other classmates, and the context is more relaxed than when they submit an essay for the instructor's eyes only. I model this for my students in how I respond in the public forum versus my formal feedback to their essays.

Unfortunately, classrooms generally still lack spaces where students can freely communicate in their home languages. However, the institution is making strides to become more linguistically equitable. Examples include the creation of an inclusive syllabus that contains a language diversity statement, the revision of writing standards by degree to reflect linguistic equity, and the provision of faculty training webinars that support the inclusion of language diversity strategies in their classrooms.

It is worth mentioning that these initiatives have not been met without resistance. Because language is so deeply tied to a cultural understanding of education and what it means to be educated, many faculty members and administrators still do not support the change to a more embracing linguistic approach, particularly beyond the undergraduate level. In addition, it is important to recognize that the aspects of language that can be assessed through a rubric, such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, are not the only aspects of linguistic diversity that should be evaluated. Inclusive language, modes of expression, and language style are also considerations when fostering linguistic inclusivity and fighting linguistic bias.

Conclusion

Linguistic bias can affect student performance and self-esteem (Relajo-Howell & Beckstein, 2023). A student-centered and compassionate pedagogical ethos should compel an institution to take practical steps to address bias directly. When faculty focuses on meaning over mechanics, students who speak nonstandard English at home, who are less proficient in SAE, or for whom English is not their first language, feel more comfortable communicating in an online classroom. They provide their honest understanding of the learning material and express themselves more freely if they can do so easily and without fear of penalty, even if that means using their home language sometimes. Accommodating grammar and spelling deviations from SAE is possible so long as they do not obscure meaning. This should be true, particularly in courses that do not teach academic writing as English courses do, where part of the course's objectives is for students to learn the mechanics of SAE.

Within U.S. culture, a lack of knowledge of SAE has been viewed as a lack of intelligence or education. Unfortunately, some of the choices in academic courses, like how rubrics are structured, have perpetuated this stereotype instead of emphasizing language to communicate a message, regardless of its SAE accuracy. Instructors who teach a diverse population of students cannot afford to assume that nonstandard English is "less communicative, less effective, less professional" than SAE (Inoue, 2021, p. 18). Focusing on meaning before mechanics allows students to explore concepts and develop ease in the discipline comfortably. Linguistic variants should be welcomed and celebrated while still teaching SAE to keep the doors of opportunity open. As Inoue (2021) stated, "Language standards are rules we have inherited today, made by people who had the power to do so yesterday" (p. 60). The Opulent Opinions meme calling people to unlearn the need to assume that only one set of grammar rules leads to comprehension may not be illogical after all.

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