

Austin Mankin

Professor Guthrie

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In Defense of Bad English

Through schools, communities, popular culture, and beyond, children are hand fed information that draws a linguistic line in the sand between “good English” and “bad English.” That line is very confusing for some children--I was one of them. The English language I practiced on my homework did not match the English language I used to communicate with my family. I was born and raised in St. Bernard, Louisiana--a predominantly poor, white fishing community directly south of New Orleans. In my house, quarter rhymed with water. Boil and oil rhymed with girl and twirl. Our subjects and verbs rarely agreed. Words ate each other--”where you at” turned into “where y’at” and “down the road” turned into “downaroad.” Some teachers moderated my dialect in the classroom, but no teacher tried to suffocate the life out of my English more than one second grade teacher. Dislocated by Hurricane Katrina, I attended a school in the relatively affluent suburbs of Slidell, Louisiana for three months. One day in class, I was called on for an answer; my answer was correct, but my English was apparently not. My teacher told me that I needed to “speak properly.”

I am far from the only person in the English speaking world that has been told one way or another that my English was “bad.” In American culture, numerous nonstandard dialects of English are stigmatized, acquiring various social and cultural meanings. These dialects are constantly compared to “good English” or less superciliously termed “standard English”. I push

back on the eminence of “good English” to defend the linguistic underdogs of the “bad Englishes.”

To assert that an English speaker should use “proper English” carries the assertion that the English they are native to speaking is improper, that it is dysfunctional and/or indecipherable. However, non-standard dialects of English come equipped with their own set of systemic grammar rules. There are countless grammar rules in the dialect used by many African Americans, known as African American Vernacular English (shorthand: AAVE). The word “be” in AAVE is used to modify verbs, indicating that something happens continuously or habitually. So when someone says “she be going to work,” the word “be” functions to indicate that she goes to work regularly, translating into standard English: “she goes to work often.” Appalachian English follows its own set of grammar rules as well. Speakers of Appalachian English often attach the letter “a” as a prefix to verbs. This linguistic technique, called a-prefixing, can only be attached to verbs, as seen in phrases such as “she was a-walking.” Henceforth, the a-prefix is not mindlessly attached to random words and therefore abiding to a grammatical rule. Both of the dialects mentioned above are entirely rule-bound. These dialects are not by nature ungrammatical; they are only ungrammatical when the rules of the particular dialect are not conformed to. Neither African American Vernacular English nor Appalachian English are “Standard English (Chopped & Screwed)” but instead “Standard English (The Remix).” They follow a different melody, structure, and tempo than standard English, but still nonetheless function as a musical arrangement.

It’s important to note that “bad English” dialects do not have anything inherently “bad” about them and that “good English” dialects do not have anything inherently “good” about them. Nonstandard dialects acquire their stigmatized meaning through social and cultural forces. It is

not a coincidence that speakers of nonstandard dialects like Appalachian English and AAVE have historically been shut out from quality educations by systemic oppression, with speakers of both dialects being disabled by poverty and speakers of AAVE being further disabled by systemic racism. Henceforth, nonstandard dialects are often been associated with a lack of education--this can be seen in popular culture, from minstrel shows to *The Maury Show*. 18th century minstrel shows mocked black people in disparaging ways: as ignorant, lazy, unsophisticated, overly emotional, and dull-witted. It is no stretch to suggest that The Maury Show functions in a same way, bringing black people to a daytime TV set to fight about infidelity until Maury invokes his iconic catchphrase: "you are NOT the father." Although the medium has changed, the consumption of negative portrayals of black people as entertainment has not. The association of these dialects with ignorance can be seen when these dialects are mocked in popular culture, with their dialect often used as a vehicle in the portrayal of unintelligent characters. These representations are one of the ways in which "bad English" dialects acquire their "bad." Linguistic prejudice reflection does not just result in negative portrayals in entertainment or hurt feelings; it often affects institutions that govern people's lives. The clearest reflection of how modern linguistic prejudice operates institutionally can be found in the controversial 2013 trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Rachel Jeantel was the prosecution's star witness; Rachel Jeantel also spoke AAVE during the trial. Given that Jeantel was the last person to communicate with Martin before he was murdered, her testimony was extremely important. However, in the jury's deliberation, her testimony was not mentioned. Zimmerman was exonerated. Weeks later juror B37 said on an interview with Anderson Cooper that Jeantel "was not a good witness because of the phrases used during her testimony" (Cooper). The permeation of linguistic prejudice into our institutions resulted in

Jeantel and her testimony not being respected in a courtroom. Linguistic prejudice is real and not only an attack on a nonstandard dialects, but the very speakers who use them as well. As shown in pop culture and cases like those of Rachel Jeantel, linguistic prejudice for standard English is often nothing more than a thinly veiled exercise of racism, classism, and/or ethnocentrism.

Now I know what you're thinking: while it may be unfair that speakers of nonstandard dialects face stigma, this is the reality, and until this reality changes the only way for these speakers to move ahead academically and/or professionally is to speak the standard English. You may be correct about this; unfamiliarity with a dialect stokes fear in an audience and paves the way for miscommunication. The problem with accepting societal linguistic prejudice is that it leaves no space for bidialectalism in institutions that need them to better serve *all* English speakers, many of which that come from marginalized communities. The clearest example of an institution in need of bidialectal embrace is the educational system. Multiple studies have found that the best way to teach children who only hear standard English in school is to teach standard English as an alternative rather than a correction to their native dialect. By embracing bidialectalism, millions of marginalized students are actually given better access to academic or professional success, rather than further blockaded from these successes--I can attest to this. I was lucky to encounter many teachers throughout my early education that did exactly this. In academic settings, these teachers promoted a specific concept without ever identifying it--code switching. When called upon for an answer or asked to read a passage aloud, these teachers offered the standard English pronunciation for any words that my dialect changed drastically--not as a correction, but as an alternative appropriate for the setting. It was the help of these teachers that allowed me to navigate academic spaces with the relative success that I did, leading to a full tuition scholarship at my dream school, Tulane University. Interestingly enough, the

week before my classes at Tulane University began, I attended a workshop at the New Orleans Center for Ethical Living and Racial Living. At the beginning of the workshop, everyone stated their name and where they came from. At the end of the workshop, I was approached by one of the workshop's coordinators with "I knew you were from da parish da second you opened ya mout." For ten minutes, we discussed what it meant to be from St. Bernard Parish in the non-St. Bernard Parish world. Most memorably, she shared her story as a student at Tulane University "a few decades back" with me. She shared the moments of her academic career where she felt devalued by professors because of the way she spoke. Then she sharpened her tone and said to me, "don't forget ta code switch!" I laughed and assured her that I didn't manage to make it out of the parish without learning a thing or two about code switching.

Often times when I speak in class or a job interview, I feel like I'm speaking another language. Despite the fact that English is the sole *language* that I am fluent in--in these moments, I feel bilingual. This predicament gives me the opportunity (that I have been waiting for my entire life) to invoke a Dave Chappelle quote in an academic paper: "Every black American is bilingual. We speak street vernacular and we speak job interview" (Guerra). Chappelle expertly uses comedy to land a social message: speakers of nonstandard English dialects can often only overcome the stigma surrounding their dialect by being fluent in standard English as well. This reality demonstrates a need to distinguish dialects as "formal" and "informal" rather than "good" and "bad." This reality makes it worth noting that nonstandard English dialects are rule-bound expressions of the English language that have only acquired their "bad" meaning through oppressive cultural and social forces. In the face of those who stress the importance of standard English, the embrace of nonstandard dialects (perhaps ironically) paves the way for speakers of

these dialects to acquire standard English. So far all the standard English lingual imperialists and grammar puritans out there: ya English is not more better than mines.

Works Cited

Cooper, Anderson. "Exclusive Interview With Juror B-37; Defense Team Reacts to Juror Interview." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 15 July 2013.

Guerra, Jennifer. "Teaching Students How to Switch between Black English and Standard English Can Help Them Get Ahead." *State of Opportunity*, 16 July 2014.