

## Understanding Correlations between Standard American English Education and Systemic Racism and Strategies to Break the Cycle

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### ABSTRACT

*Assessing how primary and secondary educators teach Standard American English (SAE) in the classroom and its effect on both white students and students of color. By asserting SAE's "correctness" above African American Language (ALL) and/or other cultural dialects, students internalize the "correctness" of "white" language and the "incorrectness" of cultural dialects spoken in the home; thereby internalizing the "correctness" of white culture over other cultures, and adding to the cycle of systemic racism in the US. In interviews with both white students and students of color, as well as white teachers and teachers of color, this paper looks at the correlation between how we teach SAE and the continuation of systemic racism. By reframing SAE in primary and secondary education as "Business English" or "Academic English," and acknowledging cultural dialects as valid forms of communication, and often as the appropriate way to express oneself in a given situation, we can begin to de-stigmatize cultural dialects, and begin to bring a wider understanding of how language and culture work and coexist to our students. As such, by acknowledging the equal value of cultural dialects while instructing students in business and academic English, we can end the cycle of English instruction as a means to continue systemic racism in the US.*

### PROBLEM

Teaching English, as opposed to any other subject, is teaching how to communicate, often with an emphasis on communication, whether oral or written, in higher education. When educators stress the correctness of Standard American English (SAE) over any other language or cultural dialect, without any cultural sensitivity, students often internalize the correctness of "white" culture over other cultures, believing that SAE is "white speech."

### DISCUSSION

We can all agree that education is the key to intellectual freedom, and that our ability to communicate is paramount to our understanding of the world, as well as our ability to create meaning within our own lives. The study of English, both rhetoric/composition and literature, not only aids in reading and writing, the foundation of communication, but the study of literature unites us through the understanding that the basic human experience is universal. While analytical reading and writing are practicable skills, and give students the opportunity to develop their own voice and

discover their own writing processes, they are not the extent of what we teach in English courses. It has been argued<sup>1</sup> that "the 'new racism' [...] a 'racism that still exists, even if its form has changed'—is deeply entrenched in our discourses about languages" and that "the unresolved racism [we are experiencing, particularly] in the U.S. [...] has given way to a [...] rhetoric about language diversity and education that has drastically skewed our understandings of" how we teach English (Greenfield 34). To put it simply: our continual assertion that Standard American English (SAE) is superior to any other language or cultural dialect is aiding in the continuation of the underlying systemic racism currently existing in the United States.

Often "our assumptions about language are guided [...] by a rhetoric that feeds on our unconscious racism," and in classrooms across

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<sup>1</sup>From Sarah Greenfield's book, *Writing Centers and the New Racism*. Chapter title: *The 'Standard English' Fairy Tale: A Rhetorical Analysis of Racist Pedagogies and Commonplace Assumptions about Language Diversity*

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the country we teach students that “in order [for them] to be taken seriously and be successful in life [they] must know how to speak ‘correctly’” (Greenfield 35). The unfortunate side effect of this pedagogical approach to teaching English is that we are continuing a cycle of racism in our schools: we are, in effect, teaching racism. From a linguistic standpoint, all languages are equal: there is no one language that is superior to another, as all languages evolve over time to meet the developments and advancements in a growing and changing society. There is no hierarchy of language. As educators, however, we each believe that our own subject is the most important: math teachers believe math is the most important, history teachers believe history is the most important, science teachers believe science is the most important, and so on. Problematically, with teaching Standard American English, by asserting that the English language is the most important, we are suggesting that all other languages and cultural dialects are less important. When we tell students that they are saying something “wrong” or that they are speaking “incorrectly,” we are placing a value judgment on how they speak in their home, with their families, or with their friends. This is not to suggest that we should not teach Standard American English in school, or that we should not require all students’ written work to be in elevated, academic language, this is simply to suggest that we need to reframe the way we teach Standard American English: with an understanding that English is one of many languages, and that cultural dialects are just as valid, and are often the most effective way of expressing oneself.

The language discrimination that takes place in English classes has caused some to argue<sup>2</sup> that “academia does not express positive attitudes toward teaching African American students” and that “many of the assumptions, values, and practices of people and institutions hinder the learning of students of color” (Costner et. al. 40). If academics are auguring that teachers “do not express positive attitudes toward teaching African American Students,” the question then remains: how do the students, especially primary and secondary students, internalize this idea? When discussing this disparity with students of color, they all agree that the idea that

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<sup>2</sup>From Kelly L. Costner and Kevin Daniels’ article: *An Examination of Faculty Attitudes Toward Teaching African American Students*

Standard American English was not only “white speech,” but was superior to any typically African American dialect spoken in their homes and within their communities was “drilled into their heads”<sup>3</sup> in their primary and secondary education. In direct opposition to this idea, white students were taught that their communication at home and in their communities was “correct,” and that “everything [they] learned in school reinforced the idea that they were ‘right.’”<sup>4</sup> White students understood that the “constructive criticism” they received from their teachers was merely the grammatical and syntactical help that they needed in order to succeed in university and beyond. Black and Latino students, on the other hand, understood that the criticism they received was suggesting that they were wrong, their cultural dialect was wrong, and that culturally speaking, their cultures were inferior to white culture. In these instances, “constructive criticism” was destructive to the students.

In the case of first generation American students, where a primary language/English hybrid is spoken in the home, students admitted to feeling as though their parents language skills were “inferior to theirs,”<sup>5</sup> despite the fact that their parents spoke multiple languages. One student, in an effort to help her father’s English improve, was told that she “made him feel dumb,”<sup>6</sup> because she was employing the same tactics used in her English class: she would tell him that he was “wrong,” or that what he was saying was “not right,” even though in his primary language what he was saying was grammatically correct. If using the same pedagogical methods used in primary and secondary English classes makes adults feel “dumb,” what are they doing to the children we teach? By insisting that Standard American English is the only “right” way to express oneself, we are instilling in our black and Latino students feelings of inferiority, and reinforcing feelings of superiority in our white students, thereby continuing the cycle of systemic racism.

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<sup>3</sup>Student is a minor, and will therefore remain anonymous

<sup>4</sup>Student is a minor, and will therefore remain anonymous

<sup>5</sup>Student is a minor, and will therefore remain anonymous

<sup>6</sup>Student is a minor, and will therefore remain anonymous

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The idea that Standard American English, or white speech, is superior has permeated into the psyche of every American, so much so that even among the black community people are judging each other's educational levels based on how "white" their speech is: the whiter your speech, the more educated you are considered. In an interview with an African American teacher, she confessed that her marriage suffered because her family believed her to be far more educated than her husband; this assumption was based solely on his communication style. Her husband had earned a college degree, but had a southern drawl and spoke in a distinct southern black dialect. While he is a very educated man, his speech caused his in-laws to insult him and feel superior to him, which in turn caused problems within his marriage. Sadly, this anecdotal evidence is not unique. Often African Americans' levels of education are judged based on their regional or cultural dialects, whereas a southern white person's dialect is considered "quaint" or "charming," rather than uneducated. A white southerner, speaking in a distinct southern white dialect is not immediately judged to be as uneducated as a black southerner speaking in a southern black dialect. Sadly, in an effort to climb the social and educational hierarchy ladder, people will try to distance themselves from cultural dialects that are considered to be lesser educated, even within their own cultural communities. Instead of educators teaching inclusiveness, we are inadvertently teaching racism.

The degree to which people are unwilling to admit that this educationally accepted racism is even happening was quite eye opening as well. While setting up interviews with black and Latino students, several white teachers put up seemingly innocuous road blocks to allowing their students' voices to be heard. From permission slips not being readily available, to not responding to requests for confirmation of interview dates for weeks at a time, to just plain forgetting to ask students if they wanted to discuss their experiences in their English classes, several schools with largely African American populations were somehow unable to be a part of this study. When looking at this "oversight," one can only surmise that a subconscious racism was at play here. While we cannot immediately suggest those particular white teachers are racist, we can suggest that the feelings of superiority are evident insofar as the

teachers did not want, or were unwilling to give their students the opportunity to express themselves. The argument can therefore be made that how much "African American students are likely to benefit from their classroom experience has been and continues to be strongly tied to faculty attitudes toward teaching this population. The research focusing on teacher attitudes and expectations has provided a clear and strong link between teacher attitudes and expectations and student achievement" and "that teacher expectations play a significant role in determining how well and how much students learn and the quality and quantity of learning opportunities provided to students" (Costner et. al. 41). As educators, our students are our primary concern, and we must begin educating each student with a cultural understanding and sensitivity, as well as give each student equal access to opportunities for learning and growth.

Teachers "are tremendously significant and powerful individuals in the lives of their students, and what an individual faculty member projects [can have] a profound impact on [a student's] self-perception [and] self-confidence" (Costner et. al. 41). People may not remember each individual teacher they had in school or each teacher's name, but they will remember how they were made to feel about themselves in school and in a particular teacher's classroom. As educators, we have a tremendous responsibility to guide our students to become, not only educated people, but good people. How can we teach them to be good people if we are inadvertently teaching them to be racist people? We must teach Standard American English to our students in a way that does not place a negative value on other languages or cultural dialects. We must teach Standard American English with an understanding that "all spoken language changes over time. All spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms. Grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are distinct and independent issues. Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally, and functionally fundamentally different creatures," and that "variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level"<sup>7</sup> (qtd. in Greenfield 33). If we begin each English course by explaining

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<sup>7</sup>Original text is Rosina Lippi-Green's article *English with an Accent*. 1997.

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to our students that “all spoken languages are equal” and that “variation is intrinsic to all spoken language,” then we may begin to end the cycle of English instruction as a means to continue systemic racism.

### SOLUTIONS

As instructors we must tell our students that all language has equal value: all language dialects and cultural dialects are equal. We must let our students know that what we are teaching is important, not because it is the most important, but because it is used in academia and business. When we give constructive criticism, we must ensure that our students know it is being given without any value judgments: constructive criticism should be designed to help students succeed, not make them feel like failures. We must ensure that we are inspiring our students: people who teach English courses do so because they love English; let us pass that love along to our students.

### WORKS CITED

- [1] Costner, Kelley L., Kevin Daniels and Marco T. Clark. *The Struggle Will Not Continue: An Examination of Faculty Attitudes Toward Teaching African American Students*. Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 41, No. 1 (September 2010), pp. 40-55. Sage Publications, Inc. (Print).
- [2] Greenfield, Laura and Karen Rowan. *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. University Press of Colorado, Utah State University Press. (2011). (Print).

### SPECIAL THANKS

To all the students who participated in this study, thank you. Thank you for helping a very white teacher understand your experiences, and for helping me to understand that we need to make a pedagogical change in order to move forward.

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