How professors can and should combat linguistic prejudice in their classes (opinion)

Submitted by Catherine Savini on January 27, 2021 - 3:00am

A couple of years ago, I worked in the writing center with a student on a paper about her identity development. She received high marks for content but lost points for writing. As I read her paper, two things struck me: first, she had grown up in Boston, but her parents were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At home, she spoke Lingala, which she hid from her friends after she was mocked. Second, many of her sentences were indecipherable. She wrote, for example, "I didn't have an indistinguishable surface hair from different females in my class and they wouldn't converse with me or simply give me disposition since I didn't seem as though them."

After a decade of working in writing centers, I knew to ask, "Did you use the thesaurus to write this?" And she told me that, in an effort to sound academic, she had used the thesaurus for *every single sentence* in this essay about her own identity development. Teachers had told her not to write like she speaks but to translate her Black vernacular English (BVE) into standard academic English (SAE). I suspect that most of us would feel a flash of rage if we heard the insults slung at her for speaking Lingala, but many of us would also mark her down for writing in BVE. Why?

I spent decades operating with this cognitive dissonance. As a white, middle-class English professor, I've corrected a lot of sentences and made a lot of assumptions about people's intelligence based on how they speak and write. As a Ph.D. candidate in English, I began to recognize the pain linguistic racism inflicts thanks to Gloria Anzaldúa, Amy Tan and James Baldwin, but somehow their work never caused me to question my approach to student papers.

But now, on my predominantly white campus, I regularly hear stories of linguistic prejudice perpetrated primarily against students, staff and faculty of color. It's not just speakers of BVE; multilingual students have told me that if they are talking with a peer in their native language, they switch to English as soon as they enter an academic building. When one student explained to her professor that her sentences tended to be long because she is a native Spanish speaker, the professor responded, "You are not in Puerto Rico anymore." Two Spanish-speaking students told me that their high school guidance counselors told them that they wouldn't be able to succeed in college. (They have.) Many of these students have come to my writing center demoralized by papers covered with ink, marked with low grades and scrawled with directives to "go to the writing center."

But we must teach students to write standard academic English, and we must mark them down if they do not meet those expectations -- otherwise, they will not succeed in the real world, right? That is the traditional argument in favor of requiring all students to write in standard academic English in the classroom. Renowned literary scholar and public intellectual Stanley Fish [1] defends this stance, explaining that it's wonderful that people speak multiple languages and dialects, but the classroom is the place to learn to communicate in SAE.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, transdisciplinary scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young [2] rejects standard language ideology as racist, arguing that we should invite students to weave multiple dialects. He calls this "code-meshing." Responding to the argument that learning standard academic English will protect students of color from prejudice, Young writes, "But dont nobody's language, dialect, or style make them 'vulnerable to prejudice.' It's ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people's language. Like the way some view, say, Black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed." According to Young, if we value Black vernacular English and other dialects, we can shift racist attitudes rather than reinforce them.

A middle stance involves teaching students to communicate in standard academic English without degrading their dialect or home language by providing students with opportunities to use their dialects and languages in an academic setting and by exposing the power structures at work.

Ten years ago, I would have taken Fish's approach and worked with the Congolese American student to revise her paper to meet the expectations of standard academic English. I would have identified "patterns of error," focusing on grammatical issues that impeded meaning. I did not know then that the majority of linguists agree that all dialects are created equally, so I would have authoritatively taught her the "correct" subject-verb agreement without acknowledging that Black vernacular English has its own, equally legitimate grammar rules.

Instead, I took a Young-inspired approach with this student. First, I talked with her about the devaluing of her languages, both Lingala and BVE. Second, I emailed the professor and asked if the student could rewrite the paper in BVE. I attached Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English," where he advances a sophisticated academic argument, all while code-meshing. The professor agreed that it would be appropriate if the student wrote in BVE "given the nature of this particular assignment on identity." This professor took a step toward combating linguistic prejudice, but what else can we as faculty members do?

1. **Ask students about their language backgrounds.** Many professors ask students to share information about themselves at the beginning of the semester by way of a survey. It is also worth asking students: "What languages or dialects did you grow up speaking at home? What languages and dialects did you learn in school? Have you ever been mocked or degraded for how you speak or write? Would you like feedback on your grammar?" Ask all students rather than singling students out.
2. **Assess students on what you are actually teaching them.** Many professors feel as if they are not doing their jobs if they don't mark students down for not writing in standard academic English, or they fear that they are misleading students and not preparing them for "the real world." But when we assess for standard academic English, we are putting multilingual and multidialectal

students at a distinct disadvantage. Asao B. Inoue argues that we should grade so that "every student, no matter where they come from or how they speak or write, can have access to the entire range of final course grades possible." So don't penalize students for not writing in SAE and consider implementing grading contracts [3] that value labor, effort and process rather than quality, standardization and product.

3. **Provide students opportunities to write in their own voice.** For example, in the writing center, we invite students to freewrite in their native language. In my courses, I ask students to write for public audiences. Public discourse provides more opportunity for diverse dialects and code-meshing, and students can present rich academic research and advance sophisticated arguments to broad audiences.

4. **Don't view students who are learning English or who speak/write in Black vernacular English as a problem that needs fixing.** Students are often made to feel as if their linguistic and dialectical diversity is a liability in an academic space, but speaking multiple languages is a strength, and BVE is not inferior to standard academic English. Many institutions send mixed messages: we want to be more diverse, yet we grumble that students "can't write" when they don't conform to academe's expectations. We promote diversity, yet the way we assess students values homogeny.

5. **Work harder to understand students who are multilingual/multidialectal both in writing and orally.** Ask questions in the margins when you don't understand a students' writing and avoid feedback such as "awk" or "unclear." When it comes to oral participation, don't rush students, don't correct them and don't finish their sentences unless they ask for help. Create group guidelines for discussion in class so that everyone listens generously.

6. **Ask yourself what is making the writing unclear to *you*.** Be aware that patterns of academic discourse in the United States are not the norm. Once when I told a Russian student that I couldn't find her argument in the introduction, she told me that explicitly stating one's argument would insult the reader. Relatedly, students come to the classroom with two opposing responses when I assign Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English?": "That was so fun to read" or "That was so hard to read." When they say it was hard, I ask, "For whom? Why?" Young's essay is a harder read for students who grew up in predominantly white communities. I ask those students to consider what it would be like for them to be expected to read and write in Black vernacular English only.

7. **Add a syllabus statement that values linguistic diversity.** For example: "Diverse languages and dialects are welcome in this classroom. As we communicate with one another, keep in mind that the reader/listener should work as hard as the writer/speaker in the communication process. This means that we will listen patiently, work to understand one another, seek out clarification when necessary and avoid finishing each other's sentences or correcting grammatical errors unless invited to do so."

8. **Design discipline-appropriate approaches to combating linguistic prejudice.** A Spanish professor I work with adjusted his curriculum when he recognized that he was valuing Spain's dialect above Puerto Rico's. A communications professor encourages her students to write blog posts in their native dialects. A music professor integrates songs with diverse dialects and invites students in the class and outside experts to discuss those dialects.

9. **Learn about linguistic bias and its impact.** Check out Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster and John Trimbur's "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach [4]"; April Baker-Bell's *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy [5]*; and John R. Rickford and Sharese King's "Language and Linguistics on Trial: Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and Other Vernacular Speakers) in the Courtroom and Beyond [6]." If we purposefully immerse ourselves in these theories and approaches, our pedagogy will inevitably evolve.

10. **Raise awareness about linguistic prejudice on your campus.** An urban planning student in my class read Young's article and responded this way: "As an aspiring urban planner, both my classes and personal interests have brought me to many public meetings where I listen to predominantly white planners discuss their plans for predominantly black or Hispanic communities. Before [this] class, I would've dismissed many of the communities' concerns because they didn't sound intellectual." By reading Young once, this student learned to separate dialects from intelligence.

It is not enough to create room for dialectical diversity in the classroom; we must also combat linguistic prejudice by revealing it. You can do a range of things, including showing short videos, such as these TED Talks by Jamila Lyiscott [7] and Karen Leung [8]. You can assign "Respect AAVE [9]" by Nicole Cardoza. You can organize a screening of *Talking Black in America [10]* or invite a

multilingual/multidialectal panel of students, faculty and staff to share their experiences.

The 1974 College on Composition and Communication statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language acknowledged that "rejecting one's native dialect is to some extent a rejection of one's culture." It is time that we take concrete steps to create a learning environment that values diverse languages and dialects. In taking those steps, we teach our students to listen more actively and communicate in a world where people speak and write in so many different Englishes. And we begin to dismantle the white supremacy that our academic institutions too often perpetuate.

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Links

[1] https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/24/what-should-colleges-teach/

[2] https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=ijcs

[3] https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/

[4] https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=faculty

[5] https://www.routledge.com/Linguistic-Justice-Black-Language-Literacy-Identity-and-Pedagogy/Baker-Bell/p/book/9781138551022

[6] https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Rickford_92_4.pdf

[7] https://www.ted.com/talks/jamila_lyiscott_3_ways_to_speak_english?language=en

[8] https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_leung_embracing_multilingualism_and_eradicating_linguistic_bias

[9] https://www.antiracismdaily.com/archives/respect-aave-anti-racism-daily

[10] https://www.talkingblackinamerica.org/

[11] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/teaching-and-learning

[12] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/transforming-teaching-learning