

Language Standardization & Linguistic Subordination

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Language standardization involves minimizing variation, especially in written forms of language. That process includes judgments about people who don't or can't use the standard forms. These kinds of judgments can unfairly limit people's access to opportunities, including in educational and professional realms. In this essay, we discuss standardized language varieties and the specific ways beliefs and ideologies about them allow judgments about language to become judgments about people, especially groups of people who share, or are presumed to share, gender, race, ethnicity, social status, education status, and numerous other socially salient identities. After describing how the process of standardization occurs, we illustrate how the expression of language peeves becomes embodied. Finally, we discuss how ideologies about standardized language circulate in higher education to the detriment of many students, and include a range of suggestions and examples for how to center linguistic justice and equity within higher education.

Language peeves seem harmless, which only enhances their power. How serious could it be to complain about people's use of apostrophes or double negatives or the contraction *ain't*? The features under fire are relatively trivial when it comes to mutual comprehension. At the same time, many articulations of language peeves, intentionally or unintentionally, belittle or humiliate those who have "transgressed," which is not trivial. Such peeves can become a referendum on the people themselves rather than "just" their language. For example, someone who uses *ain't* may be understood as uneducated; or an expression like *we don't want none of that* is presumed to be illogical and thus a sign of a speaker's inability to think precisely. And these kinds of judgments can unfairly limit people's access to opportunities, including in educational and professional realms.

To understand the unfairness of these judgments and their real-world implications, it helps to return to our use of scare quotes around "just" in the previous paragraph. The languages we speak are essential parts of our identities; they are not just how we talk about the world but are part of who we are and part of our

cultures and communities. Further, the languages we speak are part of how we understand the world we live in. For example, one of the authors of this essay, who is from the Southern United States, can use multiple modal verbs to indicate finer distinctions in grammatical mood than are available with a single modal verb. In the sentence “We might should go to the beach today,” the speaker indicates both that it is an action that probably needs to be done and an action that may or may not be feasible. This construction, acquired by speakers in toddlerhood, creates a different flavor for modal verbs and is tied to how a speaker shows politeness. Multiple modals are nuanced and helpful. They are also often framed, both by those who don’t use them and by some who do, as highly “incorrect” and as signaling a lack of education and intelligence.

Given the connection of language to identity, culture, and community, judgments about individuals’ language use are frequently linked to groups of people (rather than specific individuals), particularly those connected by race, ethnicity, gender identity, social status, geographic location, and education. At their most troubling, overt judgments about language and imagined “correct” ways of speaking reinforce social hierarchies and deny the richness of linguistic diversity. The language gatekeeping that happens routinely in institutions of higher education and elsewhere ultimately promotes the ideologies of the powerful and disempowers those who are disenfranchised based on the various social groups of which they are a part.

Language gatekeeping happens in both formal and informal ways in higher education. For example, all four authors of this essay know colleagues who have policies in their courses that penalize students if their written work contains, say, more than three “errors” per page. Other colleagues give their students a list of their language peeves (for example, using *different than* rather than *different from*, or ending a sentence with a preposition, or using *anyways* rather than *anyway*, or using multiple modals such as *might could*) that students should not use in their written work if they want to please their instructor and receive a better grade. At a less formal level, students themselves may “correct” their peers for saying something like “aks” in “aks a question.” While not a formal correction tied to a grade, this judgment and gatekeeping take multiple forms, from an explicit correction to derisive laughter or eye-rolling. Similarly, we have all heard other instructors complaining to a colleague that their students “can’t write” because they confused the homophones *their* and *there* or sent in their “collage application essay.” We’ll return to the different kinds of language that are being corrected in these examples – and the harmful language ideologies that justify this powerful gatekeeping.

These instructors and students are participating in a gatekeeping discourse that circulates broadly in institutions beyond education, including popular media. Consider, for example, a 2021 feature in *Reader’s Digest* titled “11 Grammar Mistakes Editors Hate the Most,” which offers a collection of grammatical peeves

sourced from language experts like editors and college instructors.¹ The “mistakes” by “offenders” range from confusion of homophones (*their/they’re/there*) to nonstandard apostrophes to the use of *I* for *me*. One editor-in-chief, irritated by the abundance of grammatical errors on public signs, used her own pen to correct them. She explains, “I’ve only done it once or twice, but when a mistake makes my skin crawl, I have no shame.”

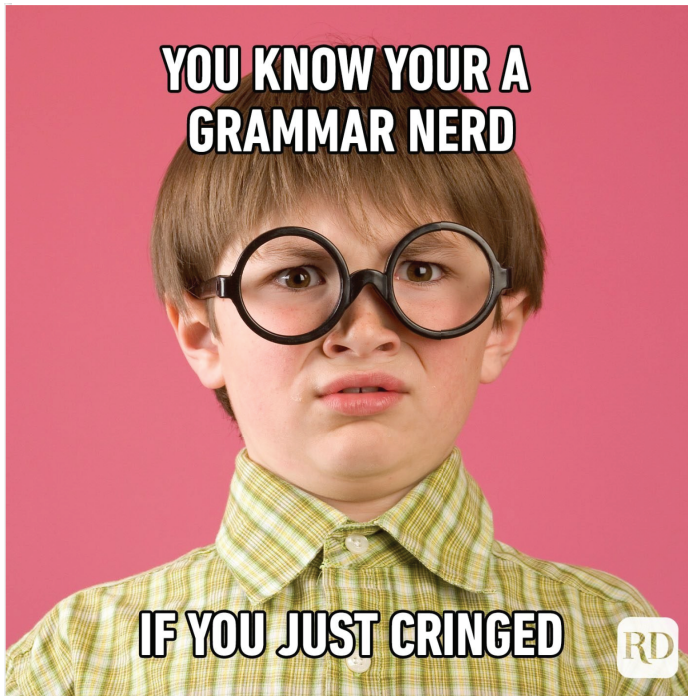
The use of phrases like “makes my skin crawl” is an example of language embodiment, which in this case describes a physical response to a visual grammatical “error.” It reflects how beliefs about language correctness are deeply held and how they are both cognitively and physically naturalized – to the point where people articulate that perceived mistakes cause physical pain (for example, ears or eyes hurting, feeling ill). Figure 1 illustrates such embodiment.

Throughout this essay, we provide further examples of embodiment/embodyed responses that occur in the name of language standardization to illustrate how deeply ingrained beliefs about what is and isn’t “correct” are.

Discussing language standardization is critical, given how deeply ideologies about language use and correctness are embedded in our social interactions with one another and in our cognitive capacities to both produce and interpret language. Standardization often hides the fact that all varieties of all human languages are equally capable of being “grammatical” in the sense that users have strong understandings of the rules that govern the variety. For this reason, we don’t use the term *dialect* or *accent* to refer to less standardized varieties. Instead, we use *variety*.² In doing so, we are committing to the position that standardized varieties are not better or worse than less standardized varieties. Yet the discourses that position standardized varieties as better, correct, or the “real” language naturalize the assumed superiority of the standardized variety. We must take seriously the power of this naturalized discourse about language “correctness” because it facilitates and often overtly promotes discrimination, both deliberate and unintentional.

We urge readers to consider the implications of language standardization within their own fields. Language standardization supports one of the most consistent forms of gatekeeping, and one in which every field represented in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences participates. The ideological power of language standardization holds true for English and for other languages, including many found in the United States. For instance, there is a general prestige associated with the standardized form of Spanish used in Spain that relegates other forms of Spanish, such as Cuban or Mexican Spanish, to a significantly lower status.³ This version of an ideology about standardized language facilitates discrimination against those who use varieties of Spanish other than those found in Spain – and, of course, the same discrimination against minoritized varieties happens in Spain itself. When we unquestioningly reinforce the belief that the standardized variety is inherently “correct,” we almost always marginalize those who

Figure 1
Standard Grammatical Use of the Contraction “You’re”



Source: RD.com, Getty Images, <https://www.rdasia.com/true-stories-lifestyle/humour/23-grammar-memes-thatll-crack-you-up?pages=2> (accessed May 30, 2022).

are minoritized in ways that appear neutral but are in fact classist, racist, sexist, and in other ways discriminatory.⁴

Higher education in the United States (and many places with a long history of standardization) presupposes a standardized, edited written form of English as the model for what is “correct” linguistically. We often talk about this variety, “Standard English” (or even just “English”), as a stable, neutral, locatable entity. Let us be clear: It is none of those things. In fact, the very act of trying to define Standard English reveals how slippery this notion is. For this reason, it can be useful to start a discussion of Standard English with the process of standardization, rather than the variety itself.

Standard languages do not magically or neutrally appear; they result from the process of language standardization. The central goal of standardizing a language

is to minimize variation in the selected variety, which can then be used to facilitate communication across regional and social dialects of a language. A common by-product is shoring up social hierarchies based on who has access to the standardized variety, which comes to represent not only a shared standard but also the one “correct” or “proper” way to use the language. Variation is natural to any living language, so the process of standardization must always work against the natural tendency for a language to morph over time, space, and social identities.

The process of language standardization is often described in four stages, first outlined by sociolinguist Einar Haugen, which we’ve summarized below:

- **Selection:** A dialect of the language is chosen as the variety that will be shared more broadly. Typically, this variety carries social, political, and/or economic prestige based on the status of its speakers.
- **Elaboration:** As a more local variety is asked to take on a wider array of functions (for example, legal documents and scientific writing), its available resources – such as vocabulary and written style – must expand to meet the varied needs of speakers and writers.
- **Codification:** As the variety comes to be more broadly shared, it starts to become more regulated in an attempt to minimize variation across speakers and writers.
- **Acceptance:** The variety is institutionalized as a standard in education, media, administrative functions, and elsewhere, and mastery of it becomes a qualification for higher education and many professional careers.⁵

Sociolinguists James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, who describe standardization as an ideology in addition to a process, expand this model to include more stages: selection, acceptance, diffusion, elaboration, maintenance, codification, and prescription.⁶ In these late stages (which are not necessarily linear), the standardized variety often acquires prestige.

There is nothing formalized about these stages; no one “decides” to select a variety and elaborate on it. Rather, selection often follows from the institutionalized social power of particular users, and the stages follow the idea, promoted within powerful social, cultural, and legal institutions, that standardized varieties are inherently better than varieties that are less standardized. The standardized variety is then available to confer social prestige on those who use it while the less standardized varieties are seen as evidence of lower social prestige. For example, in the United States, a roughly Midwestern variety of spoken English was “selected” by broadcasters in the early to mid-twentieth century because it was neither a Southern nor a Northeastern variety of American English.⁷ One of the important aspects of this selection can be seen in films from the early through the late 1950s, in which varieties associated with the Northeast become less and less prestigious.

In the film *Philadelphia Story* (1940), Katherine Hepburn's character Tracy Lord uses language associated with the Northeast to mark her upper-class status. By 1954, however, Marlon Brando's Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* uses language associated with the Northeast (specifically New York) to mark lower-class status.

The selection of the "standard" variety is not neutral, nor are the parties responsible for its codification, maintenance, and prescription. In some countries, there is an identifiable institution that promotes standardization, such as the Académie Française in France. In the United States, by contrast, standardization is enforced by a loose network of language authorities, including editors, teachers, dictionary and usage guide writers, language pundits, and the like. In English, codification and prescription took hold in Britain and the United States and beyond in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the proliferation of dictionaries and then style guides that would become standard reference tools in the educational system.

Standardization works to limit change and variability within a language variety. Change still happens in standardized varieties (for example, the introduction of the passive progressive – *the house is being built* – in the nineteenth century), but it is often resisted and only slowly accepted (for example, the use of "they" as a singular pronoun, which occurs as early as the fourteenth century).⁸ Therefore, we use the phrase *Standardized American English* to capture the dynamic processes at work in this variety. Standardized American English (henceforth referred to in this essay as SAE) is easier to distinguish in writing than in speech. While we can identify some features that are prototypically standard (for example, single negation, use of third-person singular -s in the present tense as in *she thinks, he dreams*), SAE is often identified by what it isn't (for example, *fixin to, ain't*, multiple modals, merger of the vowel in *pen* and *pin* [but the merger of the vowel in *cot* and *caught* is not stigmatized as nonstandard], *aks* rather than *ask*).⁹ As these few examples capture, these distinctions between standardized and nonstandardized language features are often raced and classed.

While SAE is often described as neutral or unmarked, it is neither. It may not have distinctive markers of geographical location, but SAE indexes whiteness and higher socioeconomic class.¹⁰ It is enforced and reinforced through discourses of "correctness" in our educational system, editorial practices, a proliferation of usage guides and style manuals, and technologies such as grammar checkers built into word processors.

It is important to note here that language gatekeeping and the discourse of correctness are not entirely consistent and apply to variety and register (or stylistic) differences as well as spelling and punctuation. Let's return to the examples in the introductory section of common language gatekeeping practices in higher education. Some of the examples involve nonstandard pronunciations or grammatical features associated with social groups, such as *aks*, *anyways*, and multiple modals.

Some of the examples are stylistic distinctions, in which arguably both variants fall within standardized usage (for example, *different from* versus *different than* or ending a sentence with a preposition). And especially with these kinds of prescriptive rules, not all language authorities will agree on what counts as an error.¹¹ For example, not all readers of this essay will care equally, or at all, about *different than*, or *hopefully* used to mean “it is hoped,” or the use of *impact* as a verb. The list goes on. Then there are typos and “grammos” or homophonous grammar errors (for example, *their/they’re, its/it’s*), which are entirely written phenomena – and in some cases created by autocorrect functions found on mobile devices that, for instance, often revert the possessive *its* to the contracted *it’s*, despite attempts by the typers to change it.¹² At some fundamental level, when we think about language as a communicative system, these grammos are trivial (we cannot even hear them in speech) and most writers have made them when writing quickly or in less proofed genres. Yet the stakes for making them can be socially and professionally high: they can be seen as markers not just that a writer may not have proofed carefully but also that a writer is lazy, unintelligent, unqualified.

The consequences of language standardization are significant because of the beliefs the process creates and sustains. While, in theory, the standardized variety could coexist with nonstandard varieties in a way that legitimizes and celebrates the richness and systematicity of linguistic diversity, the commonsense belief that the standardized variety is inherently better results in the degradation of other varieties, including both regional and social varieties of the language that are core cultural markers of communities. This ideological system, typically referred to as Standard Language Ideology (SLI), can be summarized as “a bias toward an abstract, idealized language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which has as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class.”¹³ As a result, SLI allows those in power to exclude and restrict access to power for speakers of minoritized varieties in many sectors of the public domain.

SLI generally works invisibly, by nature of its “commonsense” approach to right and wrong (or better and worse) language patterns. It allows, if not encourages, the dissemination of misinformation about language variation, and speakers of all varieties tend to accept SLI without question. This ideology captures the power of convincing speakers that their own language varieties, which they use for diverse communicative purposes, are “wrong” if they do not correspond with what is seen as standard. This bias applies not only to SAE but also to many languages in the United States such as Spanish, which is spoken variably by people in the United States depending on their background and origin. Because the standard variety of a language functions as the uninterrogated norm, other varieties are relegated to the margins as linguistically inferior, even if they may carry social capital. Those who speak nonstandardized or semistandardized dialects are

labeled ungrammatical, which translates to illogical and untrustworthy. Such disinformation consolidates power, reifies it, and naturalizes its reification.

The embodiment of negative reactions to linguistic (primarily orthographic) “errors” presents a fascinating aspect of the language standardization process, which can link bodily sensation to beliefs about standardized and nonstandardized forms of language. Eyerolls, for instance, are a form of embodied annoyance, as is saying someone’s grammar makes you sick (or [*sic*]), as seen in Figure 2.

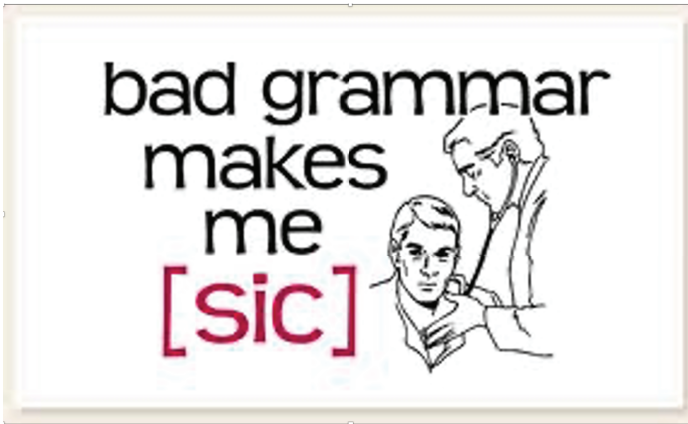
Though theories of embodiment have made their way across fields, from cognitive neuroscience to robotics to anthropology to some areas of linguistics, they have not been widely incorporated into theories of language standardization.¹⁴ Nonetheless, embodiment offers fertile ground for understanding linguistic judgment and prejudice. When a person expresses that grammatical errors “make their skin crawl,” or when certain speech modalities such as creaky voice or up-talk are described as an “embodied contagion” or metaphorical viral infection, we see a direct link to specific ideologies about language that set up the standardized form as correct, beautiful, healthy, and pure.¹⁵ Further, these embodied physiological responses to language variation suggest how deeply naturalized standard language ideologies are, including among the most highly educated.

Language production and perception – spoken, written, or signed – always engage the body directly: the hands, the mouth, the larynx, the lungs, the ears, the eyes, the motor system, and the processing systems in the brain.¹⁶ This material physicality is simultaneously involved in both producing and perceiving language, including linguistic forms understood as being correct because they are standardized. Most important, these responses embody the power of standardization and the challenges involved in dislodging that power. Therefore, engaging with and changing SLI, especially those that subordinate other people’s linguistic production, requires confronting their embodiment.¹⁷

One area of embodiment that occurs with some frequency when grammar “errors” are under consideration is laughter. Laughter is a physical characteristic of and reaction to a range of affective states, including playfulness, amusement, joy, but also discomfort, dismissal, *schadenfreude*, or tease.¹⁸ In the context of language standardization, attempts to evoke laughter most typically involve teasing, *schadenfreude*, and superiority, all of which are negatively valenced toward the user of grammar “errors.”

The connection between public humor about grammar and a taunting or superior affect can be seen in the frequency with which the “humor” of many grammar memes derives from metaphors of sickness and death, as seen in Figures 3 and 4. In examples like Figures 3 and 4, in which the memes discuss pain and death as being brought on specifically by grammatical “errors,” it becomes clear how ideolo-

Figure 2
Bad Grammar Makes Me [Sic]



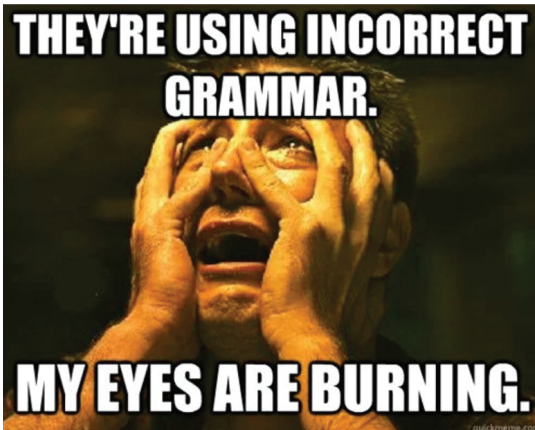
Source: Logo of the public Facebook group “Bad Grammar Makes Me [Sic].”

Figure 3
“When You Use Bad Grammer [sic] It Kills Me Again”



Source: Taken from Lenia Crouch, “Grammar Memes to Make Your Day,” *The EMS Sound*, February 6, 2018, <https://emssound.net/1560/fun-and-games>. Made using <https://imgflip.com>.

Figure 4
“My Eyes Are Burning”



Source: Taken from Rose Ledgard, “Grammar Memes,” Rose Ledgard: MA Major Project, October 10, 2012, <https://roseledgarddesigns.wordpress.com/2012/10/10/grammar-memes>. Made using <https://quickmeme.com>.

gies about the inherent correctness and superiority of the standard are reinforced through the representation of embodied illness.

In surfacing these ideologies about a standardized language, memes and other “humorous” displays of grammar errors are immediately available to denigrate socially and linguistically marginalized groups of people. For instance, articles such as *Business Insider*’s “The 13 Celebrities with the Worst Grammar on Twitter” are meant to elicit a visceral and critical response.¹⁹ Despite the availability of many celebrities with “poor grammar” who embody a range of identities on Twitter, eleven of the thirteen celebrities in this article are People of Color, including Queen Latifah who is criticized for using “U” in place of “you” in a tweet, and Snoop Dogg for using numbers “2” and “4” in lieu of “to” and “for” (see Figure 5).

These forms are clear (and at this point, largely standardized) ways to reduce the number of characters in a tweet since Twitter limits how many characters a single tweet may have. These celebrities are using the orthographic norms of the medium; nonetheless, they are criticized for using especially poor grammar.

Many news organizations have features about poor grammar that are framed in terms of the embodiment of grammar scorn, for instance, BuzzFeed’s article “19 Grammar Fails That Will Make You Shake Your Head Then Laugh Out Loud,” CNBC’s article “The 11 Extremely Common Grammar Mistakes That Make People

Figure 5

Snoop Dogg Tweet Using Numbers “2” and “4” in Lieu of “To” and “For”

INSIDER

1. Snoop Dogg (30.9 mistakes)

Alberto E. Rodriguez/Getty Images, @SnoopDogg/Twitter

Snoop Dogg 
@SnoopDogg · Follow

salute 2 my guy @iamdiddy 4 his @RevoltTV partnership wit time warner cable @TWC !! every1 congratulate puff 4 bringn music bacc 2 tv !!

2:05 PM · Jun 21, 2013

29 Likes Reply Share

[Read 15 replies](#)

Source: Kirsten Acuna, “The 13 Celebrities with the Worst Grammar on Twitter,” *Business Insider*, June 25, 2013, <https://www.businessinsider.com/worst-celebrity-grammar-2013-6>.

Cringe – And Make You Look Less Smart,” and the BBC’s article “Have We Murdered the Apostrophe?”²⁰ These types of articles present negatively embodied responses to other people’s intelligence, social class, racial or ethnic background, and presumed lack of education. Such responses incorrectly reduce language to the (formal) written language. More insidiously, they mobilize ideas about language to make strongly negative assessments of people who are marginalized or otherwise oppressed for reasons beyond language.

Deep-seated beliefs about language correctness circulate so broadly in U.S. culture that they metaphorically become part of the air we breathe. That said, we must pay particular attention to their pervasiveness in K–12

spaces and in higher education. Early in their literacy careers, children are taught to write adhering to specific forms and conventions: capitalize the first word of a sentence, write homophones correctly, and end each sentence with appropriate punctuation. They also learn that some linguistic features are not appropriate for school, be that *ain't* or the pronunciation “aks” or constructions such as *me and my mom went*. As students progress through their literacy and writing curriculums, the forms and conventions become increasingly specific to the preferences of SAE. While there are many varieties of English spoken around the world, and indeed many varieties spoken in the United States, rarely are “nonstandard” varieties permitted for high-stakes – or even low-stakes – uses in schools. Especially for academic writing and standardized testing, the use of SAE is normalized as the only appropriate linguistic variety.

The consequences in schools can be devastating. Students get silenced because they are told they talk “incorrectly.” As students experience the dissonance between home and school ways of speaking, they must navigate complex emotional terrain as they decide how to present themselves. This cascade of events and circumstances can undermine students’ confidence as well as their identity and can result in attrition: students drop out of school because they don’t see themselves as belonging there or are told, with or without words, they don’t belong there. All of this runs counter to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives that are making their way across the United States. Yet not nearly enough attention has been given to countering SLI as part of DEI initiatives.

In spaces of higher education, whether it be composition classes or writing centers, language is typically taught as one specific, idealized, standardized form. While teaching SAE to the exclusion of other varieties in schools is the normalized practice, there have been movements recently to permit students to use their home language varieties in schools, sometimes as a learning tool for translation or code-switching to help students acquire SAE, and occasionally, but increasingly, for academic purposes.²¹ Historically, code-switching approaches, which taught students to switch between their home language codes and school codes, took a language awareness approach that taught students to use their knowledge of their own language to acquire SAE. Problematically, students sometimes interpret this practice to mean their home language is inferior in school and professional settings, reinforcing deficit ideologies about their home languages and identities. Given the interconnections of language, dialect, race, and identity, some explain the practice of code-switching as “race-switching,” meaning non-white people are expected to put on linguistic patterns of whiteness to be taken seriously in schools and professional settings.²²

Recognizing the challenges of switching on the formation of students’ linguistic identities, there has been an increasing call in education to allow students to use their home language varieties for school and professional purposes.²³ Allow-

ing students to speak and write in their home varieties in schools moves toward greater linguistic justice, but it is predicated upon an essential ideological shift in the infrastructure of schooling. Before students can bring their full linguistic identities into the classrooms, the systems of schooling must create inclusive spaces in which all language varieties are treated as equally valid for academic purposes. Given the associations of particular language varieties with various social, economic, ethnic, and racial groups, just treatment of all varieties is a radical approach for education, one that relies on those with power and influence to deliberately redistribute power to those whose language varieties have historically been discriminated against in schools.

For the redistribution of linguistic power to take place in schools, the academy has to make a fundamental ideological shift away from language standardization toward a preference for language diversity. In the K–12 setting, students learn from teachers who are trained, explicitly and implicitly, in SLI through the academy. Beyond K–12 teacher education curricula, the academy trains its students to practice and prefer the standard, through the use of SAE in course materials, classroom discourse, and unstated expectations for formal and informal writing, even in low-stakes academic assignments. The practice of SAE for academic purposes is so naturalized within the academy, it is often omitted from the syllabus or assignment expectations, despite being expected from students. On formal writing assignments, the conventions of SAE often appear on grading rubrics, absent any discussion of the politics of language and standardization.

There are several tangible actions those of us in the academy can pursue to further diversity, equity, and inclusion when it comes to the treatment of SAE. The first action is to teach students about the politics of language standardization.²⁴ This approach, sometimes now called Critical Language Awareness, aims to make students aware of standardized language forms while also being explicit about the socially constructed nature of standardization. The goal is to empower students as speakers and writers to make informed choices about what language varieties and styles they want to use in a given context, with a specific audience, and to empower them to challenge systems of power that promote standard language ideologies. This conversation should also extend to colleagues across a university's campus. DEI work that does not include attention to linguistic justice cannot achieve its goals because of the mutually sustaining relationship between language and identity.

A second action is to challenge the preference for standardization within the discourse of the academy. In addition to naming linguistic justice and inclusion as a pillar of classroom discourse, academics can issue explicit calls for invited speakers, papers, dissertation formats, journal abstracts, and more that are presented within a framework of linguistic justice.

If this feels impossible, it is because the system has made SAE unchallengeable. Teachers and academics struggle to see linguistically diverse writing and speaking

styles as part of cultural and intellectual diversity. Even when permitted to use diverse language varieties, researchers and writers may be hesitant because hyper-standard academic norms are difficult to subvert. Rather than erasing the richness of linguistic diversity, we could teach the standardized version of the language as content rather than the only correct way to speak and engage.

The discriminatory consequences of language standardization go far beyond schools. For example, language standardization is problematic in legal spaces where standardized languages are privileged and others are ignored.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, many court reporters are trained only in standardized English, focusing on accuracy and typing speed, and these reporters may be ill-equipped to transcribe diverse English dialects. Fortunately, there are linguists who are teaching linguistics in prisons, such as Nicole Holliday, training court transcribers in African American English (AAE), such as Sharese King, and writing articles about court transcriber accuracy to bring awareness to these issues.²⁶

Many scholars across the disciplines consider how interactions with institutions affect people who are in relatively minoritized groups. However, little research pays careful attention to the ways in which minoritized language forms are part and parcel of those interactions. In our conversations with education specialists, psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, and others in both the social sciences and the humanities, we regularly encounter surprise at the suggestion that language, especially language attitudes, form another materialization of many of the topics they investigate. Indeed, this materialization is frequently embodied, metaphorically and literally, in feelings of disgust, illness, and discomfort. We ask of them, as we ask of you, to rethink the assumptions about language that inform scholarship, as this is one concrete way to dismantle some of the consequences of beliefs about standardized forms of language.

We have suggested some solutions to many of the issues we've highlighted in this essay; however, implementing solutions in a meaningful way first requires recognition of how important language variation is for our everyday interactions with others. Second, implementing solutions depends on recognizing how our ideas about language (standardized or not) can pose a true barrier to meaningful change. Such recognition includes the understanding that much of what we think about language often stands as a proxy for what we think about people, who we are willing to listen to and hear, and who we want to be with or distance ourselves from.

Acts of language oppression are generally directly tied to ideas about the "proper" or "correct" way to use language, and ideas about what is correct generally follow from very specific beliefs regarding standardized language forms and, often much more specifically, forms that are expected in formal, written prose. While there are also plenty of contexts in which standardized, written prose is not

welcome (for instance, on many social media platforms), the majority of us participate in the reification of standardized language expectations. These ideas circulate in virtually all of our institutions – in employment, banking, medical practice, housing, education, and business. In our own practices within higher education, we have a responsibility to regularly rethink how we teach and then come to expect standardized forms in at least some contexts. We can also learn to have a heightened awareness of how those expectations can easily slip into language discrimination and general oppression of people who use linguistic systems that are minoritized in many contexts.

Within higher education, one solution is to consider standardized forms, particularly formal written prose, as a type of content rather than simply a content delivery system. For instance, discuss the variation linked to genres of speaking and writing as a form of information. Other practical solutions include: 1) working with others to develop an ongoing meta-awareness of how attitudes about language surface – for instance, asking students to survey their friends and peers about responses to the use of forms found on social media; 2) asking ourselves and others how much of our assessment of a person is tied to something about their language – for instance, by first writing a reflection about a particular person’s language use and what it seems to indicate and then sharing those reflections for further discussion; and 3) considering how our assessments of individuals lead to broader assumptions about groups of people who share an identity or identities. We can all talk together, with curiosity and generosity, about what we think about language and why we may react to particular linguistic forms in the ways we do. Finally, we can all embrace the richness, creativity, and wonder that comes when we recognize what linguistic diversity brings to the experience of being human together in the world.

AUTHORS’ NOTE

The four authors worked together at the University of Michigan on the Language Matters initiative, an interdisciplinary initiative to increase recognition of the role of language diversity, to create linguistically inclusive classrooms, and to contribute to an inclusive campus climate. The authors are listed in alphabetical order.

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ENDNOTES

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