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Proper English in Popular Culture: Language, Dialect, and Urban Youth

Wisconsin English Journal's Associate Editor critically examines the idea of "proper" English and the role of language and dialect in our cultures and classrooms.

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Introduction

Over the summer, I attended the 30th Annual Wisconsin Reading Research Symposium sponsored by the Wisconsin State Reading Association. The UW Reading Research Symposium is one of the strongest regional forums for nationally recognized researchers to share their cutting-edge work in the field of literacy education. In line with the Wisconsin Idea, first attributed to UW President Charles Van Hise in 1904, the symposium is designed to benefit reading educators from across the state. Attended by teachers and administrators from all levels, the symposium provides a powerful professional development opportunity for those involved in the literacy education of Wisconsin's youth. Each year, a different UW Campus hosts the Symposium, and this year it was hosted by UW-Milwaukee and Professor Tania Mertzman Habeck. The title of this year's symposium was *Urban Reading Education: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.*

One overarching theme I took away from this year's symposium, from the speakers as well as the audience members, had to do with standard and proper English, especially in relation to "urban" students. First, we need to understand that *Urban Reading Education* implies the education of a particular kind of youth. The word "urban" often is used as a code word for "Black or Latino," although etymologically speaking, there is nothing that attaches a particular culture or race to the

dictionary definition. However, if you were to Google images for the term "urban youth," you would see that visually, it clearly stands for "non-white students." Additionally, our cultural models (Gee, 2003, pp. 36-37) of "urban youth" may very well extend beyond the color of their skin and into their ways of speaking and being. For example, early on in the symposium, as the renowned Professor Dorothy Strickland was speaking about the importance of early literacy intervention, a high school teacher agreed with the need for more early language instruction, saying, "My students just don't speak right – it's like they don't know English at all!"

I agree that we all need to know how to "speak right," yet standard ways of speaking and being (e.g., in school) often stand in direct opposition to cultural or popular ways of being (e.g., in the streets of an urban setting or on social networking sites). Professor Donna Alvermann (2009a, 2009b, 2010), another symposium presenter, inspired me to think about our roots, our intellectual and cultural histories, before we even begin to discuss our gross assumptions about "standard" and "proper" in opposition to something like "urban" culture. This column will touch upon some of the issues surrounding standard and proper English as related to cultural dialects and popular culture. My goal is to explore the social regulations placed on various forms of communication and challenge the rules of "what

counts" as appropriate language or "speaking right."

The Historical Situation of Proper English

Jack Lynch (2009), a professor of English at Rutgers University, writes that human beings have been writing for more than five thousand years, and that we've probably been using language for about one hundred thousand years, as a conservative estimate (p. 10). However, the concept of a "proper" form of English is much younger – maybe only three hundred years old. With these dates and facts in mind, Lynch compels us to ask:

> If language, then, is around a hundred thousand years old, and English is fifteen hundred years old, how old are "good" and "bad" English? When, in other words, did people begin singling out one variety and considering it correct, with all other widely used varieties deemed improper? (p. 10)

Before the relatively short-lived (yet now thoroughly institutionalized) rules of "proper" English were around, things were much more fluid and yielding. By today's standards, Shakespeare would have been evaluated as a very poor speller – not only the words in his poems and plays, but also how he spelled his own name, differently as whim would have it! At the same time, inconsistent and irregular spelling was the least of his proper English troubles. "By the standards of a modern ninth-grade grammar book, Shakespeare would be lucky to earn a C minus" because he capriciously used double negatives, mixed metaphors, split infinitives, sentence-ending prepositions, and *who* instead of *whom* (Lynch, 2009, pp. 2-3). However, Lynch goes on to ask:

> Does this mean Shakespeare was a subpar writer, undeserving of the place he occupies in the literary firmament? Not at all. Shakespeare did nothing wrong – and not because he was some kind of rule-breaking rebel. It's not even because a genius like Shakespeare didn't need to follow rules, or because only those who know the rules can break them. Shakespeare didn't know the rules, but neither did anyone else in his day. […] Latin grammar and style were well documented, but English was mostly ignored by the scholars. (p. 3)

That was in the 1600s, but by the 1700s, English was no longer ignored by scholars. There was a demand that needed to be filled with a supply of spelling and grammar rules, because writers and speakers wanted to be able to distinguish good solid English from the type of English that was inappropriate and to be avoided. The study of proper English, complete with grammar textbooks, was with us by the 1800s.

Part of the literary history in Lynch's (2009) book, *The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of "Proper" English from Shakespeare to South Park*, draws upon a linguistic distinction between two basic camps of understanding language use. The first is known as "linguistic prescription," which is an approach that prescribes the right and wrong ways to use language. In many ways, the prescriptive approach is the kind of language taught in schools, where correct and incorrect grammar, spelling, writing, and speaking are held in check via the highly lucrative textbook and testing industries. The other camp, known as "descriptive linguistics," is the approach adopted by almost every academic linguist who, without any judgments about right or wrong, documents and analyzes how language works and is used in everyday life. The descriptive approach accepts and allows dialects, jargon, slang, slurs, varied syntax, and outright grammatical "errors." In many ways, the descriptive approach is interested in the kind of language we hear and speak ourselves daily, even if we try to correct it in schools. When the high school teacher at the symposium said, "My students just don't speak right – it's like they don't know English at all!" – the kinds of communication structures her

students actually use in their daily urban lives would be a project for descriptive linguists.

Proper English, then, is not so easy to define. First, even if we say there is a definite right way to speak and a definite wrong way to speak, English itself undergoes many changes as time goes by. We know this when we read _Canterbury Tales_ (Chaucer, 2005), which is acknowledged as the first book written in English during a time when the elite were reading Latin and Italian, and English was deemed for the lower class. As English moved from low class to high class, Lynda Mugglestone (2005), a professor of English at Oxford University in England, has traced the history of English via the inclusion of words in the _Oxford English Dictionary (OED)_ since its first edition in 1928. In her book, _Lost for Words,_ she maps out idiosyncratic and ethical struggles among editors and learned men (mostly men) over the words that should or should not be permitted in the dictionary. For example, the word "condom" was omitted from the first edition of the _OED_ on moral grounds, with a surgeon making "the case that the word was 'too utterly obscene' for inclusion in the dictionary" (Lynch, 2009, p. 229). Yet the _OED_ eventually included this word, and the English language does continually grow. It acquired its one-millionth word early in the morning of Wednesday, June 9, 2009 (5:22AM Eastern, to be exact), as reported by CNN on June 10th. The one-millionth word was _Web 2.0_. The site responsible for keeping track of such changes, the _Global Language Monitor_, estimates that more than fourteen words are added to English every day. Tracking more than just new words, the _Global Language Monitor_ also traces how the meanings of words change. For example, on the ten-year anniversary of September 11th, it published a piece on how 9/11 changed the words we use and the way we talk today (Payack, 2011). For one thing, we can use the term "September 11th," as I just did in the last sentence, without referring to the year or the events around it, because it's assumed we all know what "September 11th" means. For another, we've redefined "heroes" to mean more than Superman. All of this is to say that the English language is more fluid and changing than we might think. Words that already exist change syntactically and semantically, even as brand new words are added daily. Strict prescriptivists who hold true to proper and improper uses of language have a lot of homework to do on a daily basis just to keep up!

Second, even if we do our homework and can define proper and improper uses of English, the ways in which we speak English vary tremendously according to different social or cultural circumstances. The words we speak and the ways we say them involve much more than a technical knowledge of grammar and word meaning, for what is "proper" English in one circumstance might be completely out of place in another. In a previous column, I mentioned Jim Gee's (2008) famous example of a professor walking into a biker bar, and asking, in completely flawless English, for a light for his cigarette. Yet the "proper" way of asking for a light in a biker bar may not begin with: _May I please have…._ Then again, it depends on the biker to whom you're speaking, the mood she is in, and whether it's even a smoking bar. Gee (2003) also notes that:

> Literacy is something different when a Los Angeles Latino street gang member writes a piece of graffiti on an urban wall to memorialize a recent event than when an elementary teacher writes a note in her journal about one of her students. […] [Furthermore], the gang member's graffiti or the teacher's journal note are embedded in different ways of talking, thinking, believing, knowing, acting, interacting, valuing, and feeling. In turn, these differences are rooted in different _socially situated identities,_ whether these be a Los Angeles Latino gang member or a first-grade progressivist teacher. (pp. 30-31)

Again, this is all to say that English is fluid on many counts. The situation with proper English

is that it is situated. It is situated both historically and in socioculturally defined present moments that outline what counts as appropriate communication forms *right then.* Strict descriptivists who hold true to the idea that there's really no right or wrong way to use language have a lot of living and analyzing to do in order to understand the linguistic rules of countless situations.

(Im)proper English: A Case of Milwaukeean Dialect

As we ponder "what counts" as appropriate language in countless social and cultural circumstances, I'd like to offer an example of a particular brand of Milwaukeean dialect. My brothers visited Madison over the summer, one from Connecticut and one from Los Angeles, and as usual, we poke fun and laugh nonstop, typically at the expense of our parents. Our parents grew up in Milwaukee, and their [Milwaukeean dialect](#) was the brunt of many of our jokes.

> *So I says to the guy, I says, do you have this inna different color? And he says to me, he says, dat der only come in one color, [donchaknow](#).*

> *There was a real hoo-ha out in the garden last night.*

> *Holy Moses, it's a beautiful day, [ainna](#)?*

> *[Yous](#) guys wanna go down by Schusters? And later you can come by my house.*

> *Throw your mother down the stairs a broom.*

Although our parents have lost much of their Milwaukeean dialect somewhere along the way, we *have* heard glimpses, as corroborated by their own stories. Throughout all the ribbing about what my parents *could* have said as they grew up in urban Milwaukee, my mother interjected a few of her own thoughts and

memories. She remembered her teachers chastising the class for using the word "by" in a sentence such as, "I am going *by* the store." One goes *to* the store, not *by* it. She recalls teachers syntactically rearranging the grammar of sentences so that mothers are not thrown down the stairs, as in *throw your mother down the stairs a broom* (a Germanic syntax pattern), but instead, one might throw a broom down the stairs *to* their mother, in a civilized manner (an English syntax pattern).

My parents' English education notwithstanding, we continued to think of ever more ridiculous things our parents most certainly *could* have said, and we acted as if they slip into a Milwaukeean dialect often.

> *So I says to the guy, I says, gimme a coke, and the guy gives me a coke! Sos he's not gettin it, [inso](#)? And so I says to the guy, I says, yous give me a coke, but I means soda-pop, eh? So the guy looks at me all confused-like, and I says, yous gotta know what I mean. Soda-pop! So-dah-pop!! Do yous got diet root beer?*

And we'd laugh and laugh until we were all pooped out.

In writing this column, I got to wondering what made this so funny to my brothers and me. (And what makes *my brothers and me* sound wrong even though it's grammatically correct?) Maybe it's because we recognized that our jokes and the way we said them were *not* proper English, and so the Milwaukeean dialect makes our parents sound a few peas short of a casserole, donchaknow. We just love that! It also may have been because it is no longer popular (even in most parts of Milwaukee) to talk as ridiculously as we made a Milwaukeean dialect out to be. There may be pockets of pieces of this kind of dialect going around, but it is not a part of pop culture. The humor, again, lies in making our parents sound out of it. (Question: Is *out of it* any longer *in*?)

Dialect, Pop Culture, and Racism

The English language has hundreds of dialects, and Standard English is one of them. English dialects differ from each other in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, but typically, most English dialects can be understood by other English-speaking people. The vocabulary, syntax, and phonology patterns of my parents' Milwaukeean dialect are different from Standard English, just as the dialect of today's urban Milwaukeean youth is different from the English taught in schools. Additionally, there are wide varieties of English slang and terminology that fall in and out of pop culture depending upon your social circles. On the *Web 2.0* today (which, by the way, is no longer in), there's a slang dictionary and an urban dictionary, glossaries for mobspeak, glossaries for soccer, or translators from English into Yoda-speak (of *Star Wars* fame). With all this at our fingertips, can anyone really claim that Standard English is a must for all occasions?

Yet, using dialect and terms from yesterday's pop culture to make fun of our parents indicates an elitism flowing through our humor, even if that was not our intent. Lynch (2009) writes: "To this day, good English usually means the English wealthy and powerful people spoke a generation or two ago" (p. 45). Likewise, the cultural theorist John Storey (2009) writes: "[P]opular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc." (p. 1). So while different in many ways, both "popular culture" and "proper English" imply an otherness and an underlying elitism.

While proper English defines the other through traditional elitism, popular culture swings with the times and defines what is hip by *not* using words like hip. Popular culture defines an otherness in terms of what the masses are thinking and doing, which can often come off as trivial with no real staying power. Pop culture is not about *speaking well*; instead, it's about *being like* (speaking) *bad-ass* (well). The pop culture translation of *yo dawg* into proper English is *hello canine*, and so forth. If you think it's difficult to follow what is proper English when and where, pop culture phrases come in and out of style more quickly, even if they describe the same concept. Leslie Savan (2006) notes that: "It's the difference, say, between *It's as plain as the nose on your face* and *Duh*, between *old hat* and *so five minutes ago*" (n.p.).

Specific social and cultural phrases are the defining elements, then, of "not speaking right" in some instances (e.g., properly) and speaking just right in others (e.g., culturally). Yet, there's a lot of lingo in popular culture that even the strictest prescriptivist would accept: neologisms of science (e.g., *x-ray*) and commerce (e.g., *Kleenex*), or popular sayings from movies, advertisements, and catch-phrases that have outlived their coolness. *Life is like a box of chocolates; I've fallen and I can't get up; Lickity split; See you later alligator; After while crocodile!* Clean and for the masses, ain't nobody gonna catch you if you say *doggone it*, *drats*, or *fiddlesticks* in a moment of anger.

However, there are dialects and lingo that won't fly. Van Dijk (1993) writes about mass media and popular culture as forms of elite racism and White dominance:

> White group members and white institutions are daily involved in a multitude of different discourses that express and confirm their dominance: from socializing talk and children's books during childhood, through textbooks at schools, and in the various discourses of the mass media, politics, business, and the professions. [...] Such discourses are not simply innocent forms of language use or marginal types of verbal social interaction. Rather, they have a fundamental impact on the social cognitions of dominant group members, on the acquisition, confirmation, and uses of opinions, attitudes, and ideologies underlying social perceptions,

actions, and structures. In other words, racism is socially learned, and discourse is essential in the process of its ideological production and reproduction. (pp. 2-3)

Some dialects and pop cultures, from van Dijk's point of view, are regarded as more appropriate than others, even in school. Culturally in the United States, we have taken racist stances toward some ways of talking and being for a long time (witness the racism against Irish immigrants in the 19th Century as just one example). Today, the racism that relies on language differences looks different. It looks brown and black and Latino and Muslim. Linguistically speaking, the racism is about who is not speaking proper English, even when absolutely everybody on any given day falls into some form of "inappropriate" language use. Patricia Williams (1996) notes:

> It is true that most black speech is clearly comprehensible as a variant of American English, albeit with grammatical and syntax patterns that are strongly influenced by West African language structures. The contorted battles over rap lyrics as political speech -- however densely vernacular the language is -- have not been about the failure of the larger society to understand the words as English. (n.p.)

At the same time, the hidden racism behind the statement, "It's like they don't know English at all," is based on the premise that black vernacular English is not a dialect of English, and indeed is not even English at all.

One of my favorite bloggers, a retired academic linguist (i.e., a descriptivist) known as the *Language Guy*, answered a post on this subject several years ago. At the bottom of a blog he titled "Proper English," where he writes about taking on the "Defenders of the English Language" (i.e., prescriptivists), a reader named "Mark" asks:

> Language guy, you rail against the "Defenders of the English Language", in

a reasonable and well argued way. Many of the DotEL are cranks. I wonder, however, at the subtitle of your blog where you state, "You can think of it as a linguistic self defense course in which you and I prepare ourselves to do battle with the forces of linguistic evil."
> If there is no such thing as "Proper English" what are the forces of Linguistic Evil? Is it solely the DotEL? Or are there other insidious forces we need to beware against?

To which the *Language Guy* said...

> By employing "forces of linguistic evil," I meant to be making a joking reference to such people as advertisers and politicians who use language in duplicitous ways to exploit people. However, the "Defenders of the English Language" constitute an instance as well for it includes people who wish to pass laws making English the official language of the USA, which is a thinly disguised attack against linguistic minorities, including especially Hispancis. And it includes people who use Standard English as a battering ram against speakers of certain dialects, most notably African Americans. Indeed, putting down how someone talks, as racist Whites are sometimes inclined to do (recall the Ebonics debate/debacle a few years back), remains the last Politically Correct way of putting African Americans down. Who knows what evil lies in the hearts of those who hold up their way of speaking the langauge as the only acceptable way?

What evil lurks, indeed. If we accept that dialects are forms of English, and proper in their own context, then we cannot be racist about it. Period. Yet how do we, as teachers, defend the English language *and* our urban youth?

Concluding Remarks: The Role of Teachers

Lynch (2009) notes that "[f]or just one third of 1 percent of the history of language in general, and for just 20 percent of the history of our own language, have we had to go to school to study the language we already speak" (p. 10). And here we are as English teachers teaching a language that our students already speak, albeit perhaps in a different dialect or with evolving pop culture terms.

The symposium's theme that I talked about at the beginning of this column was, as you'll recall, on urban reading education. This theme was chosen because it reflects a major problem we face in the state of Wisconsin. If you aren't already aware, the average academic achievement of Black students in Wisconsin ranks the lowest in the nation, and Wisconsin has the largest achievement gap in reading performance between Black and White students (Borsuk, 2007). While at the symposium on *Urban Reading Education*, I felt an energy that was hopeful and expectant to find the best answers to our State's foremost educational crisis. After all, these were teachers who care deeply enough about their profession and their students to attend a symposium the first week school is out in June. At the same time, though, I sometimes noticed a fidgety sense of discomfort: look-the-other-way, hide, make-it-go-away, ignore. Or perhaps the enormous difficulties of this profession came rushing at me, and I felt the angst, the anger, the frustration: I'm-doing-everything-I-can-for-heaven's-sake.

However, I recognize that race, language, and literacy remain difficult educational issues to talk about. It's not only us; it's not only education. For example, neither of our current political parties really bring up race as an issue much at all anymore (King & Smith, 2011). Nonetheless, the silence is deafening and deadly for the students we are failing, in Wisconsin and elsewhere across the nation.

Between the two camps of the prescriptivists, who assume that Standard English is the only correct English, and the descriptivists, who assume that Standard English is only one variety of "appropriate" English among many, many dialects, there lies a middle ground. Lynch (2009) writes that this middle ground would acknowledge how:

> *[S]ome forms of the language, while not inherently better than others, do carry more cachet, and that standard English – with all its stupid rules and irrational regulations – is still the form that's used in the corridors of power. Refusing to use it will exclude you from those corridors, even though the exclusion is often for dumb and prejudicial reasons. Pretending the social prejudices don't exist, or trying to wish them away, won't help; refusing to teach beginners about the standard forms is a dereliction of duty.* (p. 275)

Because proper English grammar, spelling, and punctuation are thoroughly institutionalized in our schools and assessments, here in the United States as well as throughout the world, it is easy to forget how man-made language is, not only in Dale Spender's (1992) sense of masculine bias, but also in the very sense of humanly constructed. Educationally, when "proper English" coalesces with "popular culture" in the classroom, a tremendous opportunity arises for both teachers and students to explore the ways in which "popular culture" and "proper English" each define, in their own way, a humanly constructed realm that defines who we are.

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