

Normalizing Inclusion:  
The Standard English Myth  
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Abstract

Linguicism causes many inequalities across linguistic communities. This paper argues that because Standard English (SE) has become the default for what constitutes 'correct' language usage, poor conceptions of both non-standard language and its speakers' identities have emerged. Those with power and privilege linguistically control non-standard language speakers by forcing them to conform to their speech patterns. To normalize linguistic diversity we must reanalyze social perceptions of standard language usage. By removing the label of “standard” in SE and deemphasizing its dominant role in society, we can better value the vast wealth of diversity around us.

Language, mankind's most impressive tool, communicates much more than just words. It is both an indication and an intimate expression of social identity. Social groups may identify members by their linguistic characteristics, using both accent and dialect as kinds of a social code to signify belonging. Examples of this include African American Vernacular English, the “lingo” of younger generations, the gay lisp, British English, and even the standard American English. While social dialects like these can indicate a belonging to certain markers of social difference (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.), they also warrant speakers of other groups to categorize and potentially stereotype others by their linguistic patterns. A study done by Shiri Lev-Ari and Boaz Keysar (2010) of the University of Chicago looked at the effects of heavy foreign accents on perceptions of a speaker's credibility. They found that native English speaking participants rated statements from speakers with heavy accents as less truthful, while those with native accents were more truthful. Lev-Ari and Keysar concluded that, “when people listen to accented speech...instead of perceiving the statements as more difficult to understand, they perceive them as less truthful,” (p. 1095). Linguist and scholar Rosina Lippi-Green (1994) writes, “...when people reject an accent, they also reject the identity of the person speaking: his or her race, ethnic heritage, national origin, regional affiliation, or economic class,” (p.165). The study done by the University of Chicago and Lippi-Green's words show how essential it is that linguicism is examined in order to better understand that linguistic oppression, like any oppression, originates from the abused power of the privileged, in this case, users of Standard English (SE).

Standard English with what is considered a standard accent is most commonly hailed as the idealized form of English. News programs are broadcast using this language. Schools teach it as the correct form of English. SE is by definition the default, or the normative form of the American English language. Just by labeling SE as “standard” it is empowered, placing all alternative accents and dialects in a separate, less valued category. As an example, look at how knowledge is produced and transmitted

in our world. SE is the language of academia, of news broadcasting, of literature. If someone does not know or use SE they have less access to and understanding of the knowledge within these materials and they have less of a chance of being considered legitimate within those realms. This leaves non-standard speakers with the message that their language, so intimately tied to their identity, is somehow innately wrong. To deny someone their natural speaking patterns is to deny them a immense piece of their culture, history, and identity. Gloria Anzaldua puts this so beautifully that I cannot help but quote her: “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language... identity is twin skin to linguistic diversity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself,”(2007) . However, SE ideology is so institutionalized that it blatantly permits the discrimination of non-standard speakers and forces them to internalize the oppression of their own tongue and identity. Mari Matsuda (1991), professor of law at Georgetown university, comments on the social construction of language. She says, “People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent,” (p. 1361). She continues on to say that “Everyone has an accent, but when an employer refuses to hire a person 'with an accent', they are referring to a hidden norm of non-accent – a linguistic impossibility, but a socially constructed reality,” (p. 1361). I believe this perfectly explains how because standard language is socially idolized in such a way, it becomes an exception to the normal ways that a language is described. SE is conceptualized as neither an accent nor a dialect, but rather a perfect ideal of a language. It is made to be correct, normal, and unaccented while other dialects are made inferior by comparison. This ideology has become so ingrained in our society and we have been so indoctrinated in that mindset that it is never questioned. Because it is never questioned, SE ideology is empowered and makes permissible the discrimination of non-standard speakers.

The solution then is to redefine the standards of correct language usage. By removing the label of “standard” in SE and deemphasizing its importance, we can learn to value the vast wealth of

linguistic diversity around us, and through that, better value the diverse populations of marginalized groups. SE is surrounded by assumptions that it is the one and only way language ought to be. That is only a socially constructed myth. Lippi-Green (1997) again offers insight into this:

People are quite comfortable with the idea of a standard language, so much that they have no trouble describing and defining it, much in the same way that most people could draw a unicorn or describe a being from *Star Trek's* planet Vulcan... these definitions will be firmly founded in the understanding that these are mythical, imaginary constructions; nevertheless, the definitions will have much in common, because they are part of our shared cultural heritage. (p. 53)

SE, again, is merely a socially constructed myth that, like unicorns and Vulcans, only exists as a reality because we have created it that way.

The trek to normalize and better include diversity begins with reanalyzing our perceptions of non-standard language usage, so that people are free to communicate to each other in whatever form is most comfortable and true to their identity. If the institutionalized demand to conform to standard language were to be halted, other forms of communication would be allowed more legitimacy. We must deconstruct the view that SE is the default and is by nature more correct, and it will allow other communities to feel comfortable with their distinct speech patterns. Speakers of any dialect with any accent ought to feel the freedom of being themselves, of communicating however they like, of being represented equally in academia and media, and not feeling wrong or incorrect in the very sense of linguistic identity. Standard English ideology ought to be redefined, so that it can be treated as another social language, nothing more and nothing less than all the rest.

To conclude, normalizing the inclusion of diverse populations begins on the simplest of levels that is often overlooked: language – what we use to navigate and talk about the world. By changing the way we view language to allow linguistic diversity more legitimacy and freedom, we can remove linguisticism from society and pave the way for speakers everywhere to have true freedom of speech. Slaying the myth of SE is not beyond our reach.

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