

Statement about Standard Language Ideology and Equity among Languages

Have your ears ever perked up as you overhear someone saying something in a way that's not quite 'proper English'? Or been on the receiving end of someone telling you ain't isn't a word or that [two negatives cancel each other out](#)? Encounters like these illustrate a truism of the human experience: our languages, like the identities they reflect, are rich, multi-faceted, and variable. However, these encounters also illustrate another familiar human experience (and one that we can all help make un-true!): the differences between us - in language, in skin tone, in gender identity - are not valued equally. And much like racism has little to do with actual skin color, linguistic discrimination has little to do with the actual structures and sayings of language and everything to do with histories of oppression and who we associate with different linguistic practices.

Our position

We, the Linguistics Department at the University of Michigan, affirm the equity of all people and we stand firmly against any implicit or explicit societal beliefs that value one person more than another. Moreover, as linguists, we oppose without reservation any and all practices of linguistic discrimination that reflect these oppressive belief systems. Dominant narratives that certain ways of using language—in writing, speaking, signing, or alternative and augmented communication—are more valuable than others have no linguistic validity: no language is superior or inferior to another, and no way of using language is better or worse than others. Notions of language prestige and linguistic stigmatization are rooted not in actual differences but rather in the sociohistorical context and power structures in which individual languages have been used and developed. As linguists, we are committed to bringing to light these oppressive forces and to helping undo them. Realizing that there is no intrinsic value to certain varieties allows us to begin pushing back against norms of “correct”, “professional”, and “proper” usage in language, and can help us co-create a better present and future.

Equity across varieties of the same language

Linguists do not support the widely held assumption that there is a standard language that should be adopted by all, and our department condemns penalties that come with not using such language. Standard language ideology is a construct that establishes a hierarchy between varieties. It misleads language users into believing that some varieties are better than others and can perpetuate harmful patterns of linguistic discrimination—discrimination that is often a proxy for ethnic, gender, class, and regional discrimination. Linguistic research has shown that there is no such thing as speaking a language without an accent (we *all* have an accent, even in our first language) and that there is no such thing as correct or incorrect varieties among users of the English language (or any language). Such beliefs are the result of language *ideologies* at work.

Language ideologies and policies that place a standard language variety at the top of other varieties reinforce false linguistic hierarchies and can perpetuate the oppression of users of purported non-standard varieties. Whether under the guise of benevolence (encouraging certain ways of speaking in academic spaces as more “appropriate”) or outright bigotry (associating certain ways of speaking with a lack of intelligence), individual and institutional behaviors that promote hierarchies amongst languages and ways of speaking are discriminatory. Because the way an individual uses language is an expression of who they are, disparaging someone’s language is disparaging their identity.

Equity across all languages

We affirm that [language and freedom of expression are basic human rights](#). Moreover, in the same way that we affirm that all *varieties* of the same language are equal, we affirm that all *languages* are equal, legitimate, deeply creative, and worthy of use in all domains of life, including scholarly production, professional responsibilities, public communication, and [classroom instruction](#). We do not support the view that some languages are inherently superior to others. Consensus from the field of linguistics has demonstrated that all languages and language varieties are of equal value and must, therefore, be treated on an equal footing.

Taking action

Below we provide examples of how you can take action toward language justice and equity at the level of interpersonal interactions, classroom instruction, and in larger institutional contexts. For individuals with relative social and institutional privilege, it is possible (and crucial) to leverage one’s role and influence to effect change. If you’d like to learn more, additional resources are listed and linked below the list of actions.

- At the personal level:
 - Let go of the expectation that others should assimilate to the ways of speaking which are institutionally/socially powerful (standard varieties).
 - Reflect on biases regarding (“standard”) language use; how might linguistic discrimination be reinforcing other types of discrimination?
 - Think of ways to push back when you encounter comments and behaviors which reinforce (linguistic) discrimination ([bystander intervention](#)).
- In the classroom / course design:
 - Make space for diverse ways of using language in the classroom, not just with regards to writing, but also on slides, and other ways of communication and participation. Remember, language is a dimension of [equity and inclusion](#).
 - Recognize Standard Written American English *as content*. Instructors can attend to and assess Standard Written American English conventions separate from other content mastery and can teach about these conventions while also affirming

students' identities. Allow students to specify if they would like more support and assistance learning and using this variety.

- If possible, provide students with opportunities to demonstrate content mastery in language varieties they are comfortable using.
- Provide students with opportunities to demonstrate content mastery outside of writing.
- When teaching writing, reflect on learning goals and attend to whether assessing writing style is a necessary part of the objective. How does or doesn't policing language benefit the learning of your students? (e.g., an Upper-Level Technical Writing course may be different from a sociology course).
- When thinking about learning outcomes in our courses, reconsider the role of "professionalization". Treating each other with respect is a necessary part of an effective and supportive classroom, but many norms of professional behavior - and imposing those norms on students - associate moral superiority with certain ways of being (usually, white, male, cisgender, etc.)
- At the administrative level:
 - Ensure linguistic variation is included in an institution's view of diversity and equity.
 - Examine how TOEFL/IELTS scores are used in admissions processes. Are promising scholars being excluded as a consequence of their language background? Is the language ability of prospective students from some parts of the world judged systematically differently from others?

More resources

Baugh, J. (2003). Linguistic Profiling. In *Black Linguistics: Language, Society, and Politics in Africa and the Americas*, edited by S. Makoni, G. Smitherman, A. F. Ball, & A. K. Spears, 155–68. New York: Routledge.

Crowley, T. (2003) *Standard American English and the Politics of Language*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Craft, J. T., Wright, K. E., Weisser, R. E., & Queen, R. M. (2020). Language and discrimination: Generating meaning, perceiving identities, and discriminating outcomes. *Annual Review of Linguistics* 6:389-407.

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-011718-011659>

Cullinan, D. & N. Hutcheson (2020) *Signing Black in America*. Talking Black in America.

[Flores, N., & J. Rosa \(2015\). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85\(2\), 149-171.](#)

Inoue, A. B. (2019). Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2019.0216.0>

King, S. & K. D. Kinzer. Op-Ed: Bias against African American English speakers is a pillar of systemic racism. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-07-14/african-american-english-racism-discrimination-speech>

Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. Second Edition. Routledge. [[available online through the U-M Library](#)]

LSA Sweetland Center for Writing (2021). [Providing Feedback and Grades to Second Language Students](#). Teaching Resources.

Matsuda, M. (1991). Voices of America: Accent, Antidiscrimination Law, and a Jurisprudence for the Last Reconstruction. *The Yale Law Journal* 100:5, [Centennial Issue](#), 1329-1407.

Milroy, J & L. Milroy (1999). *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English*. Psychology Press.

Nunberg, G. (2007). The Persistence of English. In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Savini, C. (2021) [10 ways to tackle linguistic bias in the classroom](#). Inside Higher Ed. Washington, DC. 2021.

Shaw, S. (1999). Who Wrote Your Dictionary? Demystifying the Contents and Construction of Dictionaries. In *Language Alive in the Classroom*. Edited by R. Wheeler. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Sheppard, K. (1992). Two feedback types: Do they make a difference?. *RELC journal*, 23(1), 103-110. (<https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/003368829202300107>) - feedback on content improves general writing more than form-focused feedback.

Singer, E. (2020). Accent Expert Gives a Tour of U.S. Accents - [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#) *Wired*. YouTube.

Truscott, J. (2007). The effect of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately. *Journal of second language Writing*, 16(4), 255-272. <https://www-sciencedirect-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/science/article/pii/S1060374307000355?via%3Dihub> is a meta-analysis of the effect of error correction -- error correction seems to slightly negatively impact writing

[UM Language Matters](#) (2021) FAQs

Wolfram, W. & N. Schilling-Estes (2006) *Dialects, Standards and Vernaculars*. In *American English: Dialects and Variation*. New York: Blackwell.

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