aight, so how we talkin? The Effects of Linguistic Standardization in the Classroom

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Introduction

English is, to put it bluntly, a behemoth of a language. Not only is it the official language of over a quarter of the world’s countries, but it spoken by numerous others, widespread as both a first and second language. Due to this expansive nature, English is a defining characteristic of globalization and entering the globalizing arena. But rather than focus on the expanse and clout of English across the globe, this paper focuses on the variety of Englishes that emerge from such a large entity, and how even in America, not all English is considered equal.

Of the subdisciplines found within sociology and anthropology, there are two in particular that are closely related and pertinent to every aspect of our lives as human beings. Those two subdisciplines are Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology. While there are certainly distinguishing aspects between the two, the extricable link between society, culture, and language cannot be overstated. Drawing from ideas within these two subdisciplines, this research aims to tackle an aspect of American life that everyone is particularly familiar with, though maybe not cognizant of. The societal backing behind what is considered “proper” English lead to the existence of what is known as “Standard American English” (SAE), which normalizes the language and pushes other varieties of English to the social margins.

As stated above, this research falls within the categories of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. But even within that, one can go deeper. Language is irreplaceable from culture, and language is also a defining facet of a society. Language is strongly entwined with social norms, the social workings of power, and of course, social inequalities and inequalities branching from that. In order to fully encapsulate how this research is not just looking at language and its place in culture and society, but also the marginalization of peoples and the reinforcement of social hierarchies that accompanies language use, this research falls under the domain of critical linguistics. Thus, the emphasis falls on how language plays a role in power and inequality, and in this case, how the privileged varieties of spoken and written English are the elements upon which the hierarchies of social power lie and are reinforced.

Background and Theory
Terminology

This paper centrally focuses upon Dominant English (DE), and non-Dominant English (NDE). As is seen in Figure 1, the names themselves for these varieties of English have a number of different variations. For the former, Standard English (SE) is most common, but Standard American English, Edited American English, and Mainstream English are all frequent alternatives. For the latter, non-Standard English (NSE) is also the most common term, but stigmatized dialect, vernacular dialect, and non-mainstream dialect are also used to refer to non-Dominant language. And yet, this paper will, for the most part, use the terms Dominant English and non-Dominant English, rather than the more commonly seen Standard English and non-Standard English.
As will be discussed later, using the term “Standard English” accepts the existence of a “standard” whatever that “standard” may be (Milroy 2001). Thus in calling “Standard English” the “standard,” one cannot ignore the implication that all other varieties, all of the “non-standard” varieties, are outside of the norm. “Standard” English implies a norm of “correctness,” and if a variety is not “standard,” then it is outside the norm: it is othered. In addition, as will be discussed later, a “standard” or dominant language variety does not simply rise up on its own. It is the result of intentional sociopolitical and historical processes. While Standardized English is problematic in that it still recognizes the notion of a “standard,” when it is used in this paper, it is to specifically refer to how dominant English is the intentional result of these processes (Watson 2018). Overall, because the terms dominant and non-dominant merely reflect the varieties’ relative social status in society rather than place normative judgments on the language, these are the favored terms throughout this paper (Benson 2013).

As is also seen in Figure 1, Dominant English and non-Dominant English also encompass further distinctions of language. On the Dominant side, there is Academic English. While DE is the commonly used variety of English that is supported and institutionalized by the dominant group in society, Academic English is the specific facet of this variety that is expected and institutionalized within education (Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp 2016; Baugh 2004). On the non-Dominant side is language that is present and spoken by portion of the population, and also distinct enough from DE that it is understood as a separate entity of its own. Specific varieties of NDE include Appalachian English, Hawaii Creole English, and African American Language. This paper will primarily focus its discussion around African American Language, as
it is the most prominent variety in the literature, as well as being very widely visible across the country.

Theory

One of the most important theoretical players in the discussion of language in society is Bourdieu (1991), and his notion of linguistic capital. The language that one speaks is evaluated differently by society, and for language that is “good” or “correct” that speech has higher linguistic capital and status, whereas “incorrect” speech does not. Speaking DE provides the speaker with linguistic capital that privileges them above others in the eyes of society. For one who primarily speaks non-Dominant English, they lack that same linguistic capital and thus lack the same privilege and status that is awarded to a DE speaker.

But linguistic capital is not the only one of Bourdieu’s concepts that plays a role within this topic. The second is linguistic habitus, which recognizes that there is an unquestioned set of dispositions toward language in society (Bourdieu 1991). This can be understood along with the concept of linguistic ideologies, which are the collectively held beliefs about the ways in which language is invisible, but naturalized in society (Davila 2016; Godley and Minnici 2008). Benson (2013) takes this a step further and highlights the concepts of the multilingual habitus and the monolingual habitus. Just as the linguistic habitus shows how society members accept the role of a language without question, the monolingual habitus is the unquestioned acceptance of the homogenous state of language in society. The monolingual habitus, practically identical to the term “Standard Language Ideology,” reflects how the assumption of a single “standard” and “correct” language delegitimizes and ultimately stigmatizes language that is not viewed as the accepted standard. On the other hand, however, is the multilingual habitus. As the monolingual habitus does not recognize the wide diversity of language in society, the multilingual habitus does. The monolingual habitus is premised on a set of myths on the prescription of language, while the multilingual habitus is premised on a set of understandings that accept the diversity of language in society (Benson 2013). And with the multilingual habitus, by accepting the diversity of language in society, language varieties can all be promoted as legitimate in their own way, thus mitigating the marginalization and stigmatization of linguistic varieties and the speakers of those varieties. Unfortunately, however, despite the prevalence of a plethora of different languages and varieties in America, the struggle to acknowledge this linguistic diversity in the face of Dominant English still prevail.

The following Figure 2 details how these ideas of the linguistic habitus, and the multi- and monolingual habitus can be seen within America’s linguistic situation today. From the monolingual habitus it can be seen how teachers expect their students’ language to fall within DE, and for the children whose language does not, they are ascribed unintelligent (Labov 1979). The students who use DE, are ascribed intelligence and as will be discussed below, the traits they bring with them—being white, being from a middle or upper class household, and having access to resources and education—all become part of the desired traits within society. The opposite factors which are attributed to NDE are then deemed as undesirable and should be discarded. Thus it can be seen how external factors are associated with a speech variety, and within the monolingual habitus, the non-dominant varieties are deemed “poor” or “improper” and thrown
away. This further reinforces the sole dominance of DE. Ultimately the monolingual habitus creates a cyclical function that perpetuates the existence of the monolingual habitus.

![Diagram showing the causal and theoretical model of linguistic habitus]

Figure 2: The causal and theoretical model of linguistic habitus

Dominant English

Institutionalizing English: A Brief History from England to America

Unsurprisingly, the concept of a “standard” variety of English is not a new one. Even the early days of English in America lend hints toward the notion that one way of speaking is “proper” or “correct.” In understanding the history of institutionalizing and standardizing English, one can shed further light on how sociopolitical and historical processes that have led to the linguistic state of America today. But the story of English does not begin with America. It begins with England. Throughout the 1600s and 1700s, the push for adopting “correct” English was in full swing. And of course, the model for this “correct” English was that which was spoken by the elite, metropolitan, upper class, gentlemen of the south (Longmore 2005). Other English aimed
to emulate this “high” language, and grammarians and lexicographers pursued the idea of codifying and standardizing English with this specific variety as its base (Longmore 2005). And of course, this metropolitan language of upper class gentlemen is the language that came to America with the colonists. By the time that America had effectively been colonized, the colonialists were already looking at what “proper” English was. And to that they, of course, consciously turned to the British, deeming the speech of their former homeland as the most “proper,” while countryfolk and servants were dismissed as having “bad” English, consciously constructing a language based social hierarchy (Longmore 2005).

With the roots of “proper” English in the colonial era, the next step in standardization came with universities. By the end of the 19th century, universities across America were looking to discard their old classical language curricula of Greek and Latin and instead shift to a more modern curricula focused on English and writing. Harvard is a primary example of this shift, and in doing so, greatly put the process of reifying English into motion (Horner and Trimbur 2002). Of course the English that Harvard and other universities turned to in as the focus for their English curriculum is the language that had long been lauded as “correct” in the country. What had once been just the English of the upper class urban English gentlemen, had been adopted and brought overseas to become the standard for higher education. Between the white English speaking colonial population, the emphasis on urban English as “good” English, and the implementation of this English by universities, the DE that we see in America certainly has its roots in the intersection of white Americans’ upper class, educated language.

Standard English: What’s the problem tho?

In order to fully understand the scope of the issue of Dominant, or “Standard,” English in America, it is necessary to fully understand how the hegemonic power held by DE as the standardized variety. As discussed above, standardizing a language makes it expected and institutionalized, and this variety of language is most often that of small community, an already recognized and powerful elite in a center of economic, administrative, and cultural power:’ the upper class metropolitan gentlemen in England, and the privileged, educated white class in America (Sledd 1993; Watson 2018). Over the course of a centuries-long process, the language originally spoken by this small class is the language that is rooted in and commands science, technology, government, education, media, and more, growing from the influence of the class (Sledd 1993; Godfrey et al. 2006; Birch 2001).

But here’s the thing y’all, this Dominant English that has been so intentionally institutionalized and standardized, is crazy fake. Like we mentioned earlier, the idea of a “standard” reinforces the idea of a norm from which one can judge all other varieties of the language. But, to be perfectly honest, this “norm” is linguistically arbitrary. The “proper” English that people tried to emulate across England and America was the language spoken by an urban upper class. Who spoke that English, rather than the actual linguistic aspects of the language, was the main motivation for why this particular variety became standardized (Milroy and Milroy 2012; Godfrey et al. 2006).

In addition, while standardized English is often attributed with qualifiers such as “proper,” “sophisticated,” and “correct” English, the biggest qualifier for DE is that it is unbiased and normative. DE is the common language, like common sense, that isn’t attached to a dialect, and
thus everyone does, or should know it. As Davila (2016) states, “the effect of treating SEAE [Standard Edited American English] as absent of dialect and a point of comparison for other language varieties is to create both universality and invisibility, positioning this language variety firmly in the normative center” (135-36). What this does, however, is obscure the discrimination hidden within this idea of normativity (Greenfield 2011). Precisely because Dominant English is based off of a very white American manner of speech, those who are closer to DE are white Americans (Hartman 2005; Greenfield 2011). While, of course, not always the case, white Americans get a biased, yet obscure, advantage on the basis of their language generally being closest to that which is most expected and desired. As Birch (2011) states, “the truth that we often forget, ignore, or do not realize is that the standard writing is closest in grammar to the upper-class educated spoken standard. So it turns out that that social group has fewer ‘grammar mistakes’ to unlearn and therefore they find it easier to write. This is, of course, a privilege” (537).

The final problem with Dominant English is that because it’s been institutionalized, and because it’s the language of education, and because it’s “standard” and “proper” it’s easy to be out here thinkin’ that DE is better than every other variety of English out there. But that’s just a normative judgement and that really just isn’t true. Linguists across the board agree that all dialects, varieties, and language are functionally equal (Milroy and Milroy 2001; Watson 2018; Baugh 2004). You literally cannot fight that without fighting an entire discipline. Linguistically, all varieties of English, whether they’re “just street language” or that “educational standard”—are all perfectly viable ways to communicate. And yet, somehow, somehow, “the general public regularly insists upon the inherent superiority of specific languages and varieties, failing to understand that ‘correctness’ is a socially prescribed modifier, and systematically bases policies and practices on those mistaken judgements” (Greenfield 2011:35). The fact of the matter is, any way of communicating with English is just as good as the next, and the only reason we out here thinking otherwise is cause the language of educated white Americans was cleverly instituted through a monolingual habitus as the one and only way to talk if you’re tryin to be “correct.”

**Linguistic Discrimination: A Proxy Play**

Unfortunately, however, the pervasiveness of the idea that Dominant English is the sole acceptable method of communication is a reflection of the pervasiveness of the discrimination that follows issues of language. Of course, if you out here tryin’ to insult someone based on their religion, or their race, or their sexuality, you gonna get shut down faster than a teenager’s party next to a police station. No one’s gonna question that, and also, no one’s really gonna question you if you’re saying someone doesn’t know English cause they’re usin’ ain’t. The point being that linguistic discrimination is widely more acceptable than other forms of discrimination, despite language often being so closely tied to other factors of identity (Zuidema 2005; Milroy and Milroy 2012). In this way, language itself is a tool and a medium through which prejudice, discrimination, and inequality are perpetuated, and one stark example of this is through ideas such as the Standard Language Ideology (Collins and Clement 2012).

As discussed above, the Standard Language Ideology is a concept that is quite similar to the monolingual habitus, in that it is the unquestioned, widespread, and widely accepted belief that there is one identifiable and particular variety of English that is correct and usable as the
language of wider communication (Davila 2016; Young 2011). Of course, this one particular
language variety is the one that is spoken by the privileged group in society, and thus with such
an adamant emphasis on the “correct” variety, all other dialects and varieties fall to the inferior
wayside (Watson 2018). Ultimately, this helps to maintain the status quo of social stratification
based on language, as languages that don’t fall into the rules and boundaries of the accepted
standard are easily dismissed as “ungrammatical,” “undesirable,” or “inappropriate” for wider
use (Godley et al. 2006). Standard Language Ideology is a fully held belief, and within that
belief, the commonly rhetoric used is one to diminish other languages and varieties. It’s not
attacking the speakers per se, but it sure as hell is making clear as day what speech is allowed at
the table, and which speech isn’t. But of course, language and its speakers are inextricably
linked, so the rhetorical attacks on language are not quite so far removed from the speakers as
one might think.

If y’all think ‘bout who says “y’all,” then y’all probably gonna be thinking about people from
The South. It’s changing nowadays, but “y’all” is still strongly associated with speakers of
English from The South. This is a quick example, but it highlights how language and people are
linked, and how language can be very strongly associated with a certain group or population of
speakers. While the markers “ungrammatical” and “inappropriate” may be directly referring to
the actual language, often those same markers are indirect affronts to the speakers themselves.
Dominant English is a product of privileged Western Americans’ historical and sociopolitical
notions of “correct” language, and stigmatized language is, without fail, the language of
marginalized groups within this country (Fillmer 2007). The speakers of non-Dominant English
are marginalized and stigmatized in America, and while you can’t go out and fault people for the
color of their skin, you can fault them for having “incorrect” language. Thus, linguistic
discrimination, more acceptable than other forms of discrimination, is a proxy for less acceptable
forms of prejudice (Zuidema 2005). Language is tied to its speakers, and many peoples across
the United States’ history have faced, and continue to face active marginalization from
America’s hegemonic and traditionally white class. In order to keep this marginalization present,
linguistic discrimination is a prime medium through which to ascribe groups of people
unintelligence or inferiority. Linguistic discrimination is not merely a reflection of language, but
it is the product of much deeper interworking of hegemonic power that finds ways to keep the
stigmatized in the margins, where the dominant class perceives that they belong (Hung Ng 2007;
Greenfield 2011).

Non-Dominant Language

The first thing you’ve gotta establish here is that languages change. They change over time, over
space, by speaker, by listener, with context, and there is variety speech, vocabulary, grammar
and pronunciation (Greenfield 2011; Birch 2001). Thus it should come as no surprise to anyone,
that English is gonna have well-established varieties, and as discussed above, these varieties are
perfectly linguistically legitimate ways of communicating. But, as language, culture, and society
are inextricably linked, that then means that so too are language and speakers. It sure ain’t hard
to see how DE is the English of predominantly white class, and NDEs are, perhaps
unsurprisingly, most associated with the peoples in the United States who have been oppressed
and marginalized (Godley et al. 2006).
While DE gets qualifiers such as “correct,” “proper,” and “sophisticated,” NDEs gets described as “broken,” “sloppy,” “street language,” “slang,” “illogical,” “improper,” “ungrammatical,” and more (Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumeapp 2016; Zuidema 2005; Godley and Minnici 2008; Godley et al. 2006). These descriptions are often a cover for perceptions of the speakers themselves, as “ignorant,” “lazy,” or “uneducated” (Koch, Gross, and Kolts 2001). The long-standing hegemonic group in America, white Americans, can use rhetoric in this way tobuff the perceptions of their own way of speaking, while simultaneously putting down other languages and their speakers, thus reinforcing the existing power structures at play (Godley and Minnici 2008). But it shouldn’t even be a question that vernacular ways of speaking are rule governed and logical (Snell 2013). Even from simple capitalization differences in text posts on the internet to often heard vernaculars spoken by hundreds of thousands, language used to communicate is unquestionably systematic. The doubt surrounding this claim, however, surrounds no variety of English more so than African American Language.

**African American Language’s Got Logic**

Of the non-Dominant Engishes, perhaps none have faced the linguistic prejudice and discrimination as much as African American Language has. African American Language (AAL), goes by many other names, such as Black English (BE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or Black Vernacular (BV), but this paper will refer to it as African American Language, as does Geneva Smitherman, famed linguist in this field. AAL is not, of course, exclusive to African Americans, nor does every African American have knowledge of AAL, but it is the language that is most generally attributed to African Americans. In addition, this is the language which arose out of the social and political context of the slave trade, and evolved throughout the following decades. Thus it is strongly connected to ideas of identity, culture, and values (Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumennapp 2016; Yancy 2004; Hartman 2005).

Since the 20th century, linguists have had no debate about the linguistic legitimacy of AAL. It’s not just some illogical form of DE, and it’s not just ungrammatical street slang either—rather, it very much so follows a form of set rules, just as DE does (Birch 2001; Koch, Gross, and Kolts 2001). The exclusion of the copula “to be,” double negatives, the habitual be are all facets of AAL that are very much so not random, nor ungrammatical, and do in fact occur in languages across the world (Labov 1979; Haass and Smitherman 2009) And yet, despite the linguistic legitimacy of this language, the social legitimacy still does not hold sway. AAL is a manner of speaking attributed to a historically marginalized class, and thus to keep existing power relations in play, it is in the interest of the hegemonic class to attack this language as “illogical.” In doing so it is not just the language that is attacked, but the speakers as well. And, as any American who hasn’t been living under a rock knows, the hardships faced by Black Americans is innumerable even before considering AAL. But as discussed above, in many parts of the country overt racism is condemned. Thus, subvert methods of discrimination exist, such as through dismissing AAL as without history and just “street language,” to imply that AAL speakers are then, just street people (Milroy 2001). Ultimately, more than any other variety of English, AAL is more entangled in racialization, and thus there is more sociopolitical meaning when it fills spaces, and more historical weight behind each attack it faces (Stuart 2006).
Verbal Deficiency Claims: Here’s What Y’all are Missing

Of the many common critiques made against AAL, Labov (1979) highlights, in particular, the notion of AAL’s verbal deprivation which has surrounded African American Students for decades in American schools. Bluntly put, the verbal deficiency theory posits that African American students do not have a language at all (Labov 1979). This idea first arose after flawed studies done in the 1960s mistakenly concluded that because Black students did not answer questions with full sentences, their language was deficient (Labov 1979). While today, to claim that AAL is not language at all may be a bit of a stretch, the deficiency theory has certainly molded itself to posit that the AAL is still deficient compared to DE, and this is the reason for Black students doing worse on academic and literary tests and DE speaking white Americans (Labov 1979; Harris and Schroeder 2013; Watson 2018).

What this notion fails to take into account, however, is the context in which AAL interacts with the classroom. Education is a sphere heavily dominated by white practices and ideals, and thus the assessments and structures are focused toward a white-DE speaking population. For example, AAL often employs a double negative grammar structure, which to an exclusively DE speaker, would either sound as an oddly phrased positive, or simply be incorrect. In addition, AAL also removes or uses the copula “to be” in a way not present in DE. In this way, “he walking” and “he be walking” would have nuanced differences in meaning to those who understand these AAL grammar points. But while DE speakers might overlook these nuances as simply incorrect or illogical, these ways of speaking are present in other languages (Labov 1979). Features such as the habitual “be” or double negative found in AAL are not unique to it, but are found across the globe as legitimate ways of speaking, and it is only in this American context are they deemed inappropriate and inferior (Labov 1979; Haass and Smitherman 2009). Despite all of the nuance that is lost when correcting AAL to DE, the stigmatization of the marginalized cannot persist without blindly ignoring the rules that govern the many varieties of English.

English in Education
Dominant English

Despite the agreed upon nature of all language varieties being equal, that does not circumvent the issue that in education, the variety that matters is dominant academic English. In being maintained as the inherently superior variety of English, DE is unquestionably, and often exclusively taught throughout the country (Greenfield 2011; Watson 2018). This produces a bidirectional relationship between schools and DE, in which the latter has already been institutionalized and is expected in schools, and thus schools continue to teach with it. But because schools continue to teach with it, DE is further reinforced as the widely-available hegemonic language of education of institutions (Davila 2016). But just as this cycle reinforces DE as the norm, it also inherently maintains hegemonic relations favoring white America (Grimm 2011). As discussed above, DE is often passed off as a normative language that is common for all. But, as also seen, DE is anything but normative, and instead follows the conventions of the influential white, educated class. The same is true for language in education. The language that we use and speak in educated is part of our linguistic habitus—it’s unquestioned and accepted. By continuing to unburdendly use DE exclusively in schools, DE
and the speakers associated with it are covertly ingrained as a “normal practice” into the minds of American society, even when it is anything but simply “normal.”

And those who perpetuate, teach, and model “normality,” are, of course, the teachers themselves. There’s one heck of a big correlation between teachers’ perception of students’ language and their resultin’ expectations for those students (Champion, Cobb-Roberts, and Stewart 2012). Though it can be hard ‘cause of the strength of our country’s monolingual habitus, if teachers are able to look beyond the argument that NDEs are “ungrammatical” and “illogical” and “broken” then they’d surely be able to see that these NDEs have got patterns and rules just like the DE they’re paid to teach (Godley et al. 2006). But if they don’t bother lookin’ past those surface judgements, and instead internalize the myths, then there’s gonna be a whole lotta low expectations, and continual correcting of grammar for these NDE speaking students (Wheeler and Swords 2004). What this results in is a drop in motivation for students who know that every time they speak they’re gonna be corrected, and teachers themselves forgo academically engaging the student in favor of reproaches regarding behavior and repetitive “grammar” corrections (Wheeler and Swords 2004). Thus, in discussing NDEs in the classroom, the teachers must be willing to accept and acknowledge the rich linguistic backgrounds of their students, in order to encourage and engage the students in school.

**Non-Dominant English**

*The Ann Arbor Case*

While Dominant English was instituted as the academic norm, vernaculars such as AAL have had a much rockier time finding their way into the classroom. There are two particular instances of note that must be discussed in regards to this topic, and the first of which is the Ann Arbor Black English Case of 1979 in Ann Arbor, Michigan (Harris and Schroeder 2013; Stuart 2006). This was the first real case brought before the supreme court that specifically addressed the influence of AAL on the academic achievement of students. In this case, fully titled Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School children et al., vs the Ann Arbor School District, the parents of the children contended that the school board was not providing equitable opportunities for children speaking AAL, by not recognizing AAL as a distinct language with its own rules, syntax, and pronunciation (Harris and Schroeder 2013; Stuart 2006). Despite the 1974 Equal Education Opportunity Act, parents thought that the schools within the district did not take into consideration the cultural or linguistic background of African American children, and that the schools’ assessment to put African American students into special education classrooms was at an unusually high rate. In retaliation, the school board claimed that the students’ speech was merely a dialect of English rather than a distinct language, and thus did not need to provide further mainstream English instruction for students who were simply using wrong English (Harris and Schroeder 2013; Stuart 2006).

Ultimately, the court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, claiming that the school district was failing to overcome its students’ linguistic barriers, and thus mandated that the school district develop protocols to identify AAL speaking students, as well as provide service training to teachers to increase their knowledge of AAL, as well assist students in the transition from AAL to DE. While the precedent set from this case that schools will be held accountable for not recognizing and assisting their students’ linguistic backgrounds was a great victory for NDEs in education,
the decision still emphasized that the end goal of the classroom is still DE (Harris and Schroeder 2013; Stuart 2006). Thus, although NDE was recognized formally as distinct, its overall legitimacy was nonetheless still only acknowledged as a stepping stone for learning mainstream English.

*The Ebonics Resolution*

While the Ann Arbor Case was a well fought victory for the AAL speaking parents and children of the Ann Arbor District, such results would not always be the case. In 1996, the Ebonics Resolution from the Oakland School Board sparked a national controversy and outcry as the school board pushed to recognize AAL as a legitimate language (Harris and Schroeder 2013). In order to affirm and maintain the richness of the language, as well as use AAL in the classrooms to aid students in transitioning from their vernacular to mainstream DE, the Oakland school board penned a resolution which acknowledged AAL as a sociopolitical product that was more than just a dialect, in addition to penning a directive requesting more federal funding for implementing programs to aid in the linguistic transition (Harris and Schroeder 2013; Hartman 2005; Baugh 2004; Stuart 2006). Of course, the public went up in arms over the thought of AAL being recognized as a legitimate and distinct language within the classroom, and media outlets decried the resolution as a ploy for the school board to receive more bilingual education funding, and as AAL as nothing more than black slang (Hartman 2005). Ultimately, the school board rewrote the resolution, deemphasizing AAL as a distinct language, and instead focused wholly on trying to provide teachers with proper methods to assist with AAL speaking students transitioning to DE (Harris and Schroeder 2013).

Thus, of the two big cases within the past half-century, one ended in favor of the legitimacy of NDE in the classroom, and one ended against it. One particular point of note for the latter is that though many media outlets decried the legitimacy of AAL and saw it as trying to override the mainstream English, few paused to consider the pedagogical benefits of implementing and legitimizing NDEs in the classroom (Stuart 2006). Instead, the myths and commonly held beliefs regarding NDEs, and AAL in particular, came to the fore, and silenced the discussions that went beyond whether or not AAL could be considered a distinct language or not, and how legitimate it actually is. But, both the Ann Arbor Case and the Ebonics resolution aimed to assist the students by getting the schools to act upon the linguistic barriers faced by NDE students (Stuart 2006). The question of what the appropriate action to take regarding NDEs in the classroom is still up for debate today.

*The Additive Approach for Non-Dominant Englishes in the Classroom*

For the teachers who recognize the legitimacy of NDEs as viable forms of communication, they often find themselves in the middle of a contradiction. Mainstream Dominant English is undeniably needed and expected in contemporary America throughout all of education, public life, media, government, and more (Wheeler and Swords 2004; Horner and Trimbur 2002; Stuart 2006). Indeed, “all communities agree that standard English is the proper medium for formal writing and public communication,” and even NDE speaking parents want their children prepared for different circumstances outside of their community (Labov 1979:217; Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp 2016). Thus, for many teachers, the question is how should language
be taught and used in order to prepare students who are speakers of NDEs to participate in public life and professional institutions without facing ridicule, but how too can NDEs still be recognized as markers of identity and voice that have a legitimate place within the classroom? (Elbow 1999). For teachers at this impasse, often the solution turns to an additive approach to using language within the classroom (Milroy and Milroy 2012; Baugh 2004; Labov 1979).

Simply put, an additive approach emphasizes the idea of the students’ linguistic repertoire, and rather than consider knowing DE and NDE as mutually exclusive, both can be known by one individual, and using one does not limit the knowledge of the other. Which, of course, makes a heck-ton of sense when put plainly on paper. But puttin’ it in the classroom is a whole ‘nother story. This was particularly relevant for the Ebonics Resolution, as many antagonists to the resolution paraded the use of AAL in the classroom as a subtractive linguistic practice. Which is to say that these students woulda lost their mainstream English just ‘cause they could use their vernacular in the classroom. As crazy as that shit is, students already got many different ways of speaking added to their linguistic toolbox before they even get to school, so the subtractive notion of NDE use really doesn’t fly (Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp 2016). Even at a young age, kids know that there’s a difference between the words they say with their family, out on the playground, and then in the classroom. We learn language through exposure, y’all.

Language is contextual, and we’re not so dumb that we can’t even pick up how varying language is used in varying contexts. So yeah, people are adding to their linguistic repertoire from a pretty young age, as they experiment with language and are exposed to more and more contexts of communication (Haass and Smitherman 2009; Snell 2013; Harris and Schroeder 2013). Thus, ‘cause kids are exposed to many forms of language, they learn and know when to pull out correct varieties of language for different situations, and that’s what we call codeswitching (Haass and Smitherman 2009).

**Codeswitching**

Codeswitching is the term used for when an individual switches their variety or manner of speech depending on the context of the situation and listeners. And trust me when I say, most everybody is out there codeswitching throughout their whole lives (Young 2001; Milroy and Milroy 2012). You ain’t gonna be with your friends spilling the tea over a bangin’ dinner using the same language that you use when you’re out meeting the parents of your SO for the first time. Maybe you predominantly grew up in a white household, within a white neighborhood, and thus your speech style is very close to the coveted DE no matter how you communicate. You too are still gonna be codeswitching. It won’t be as noticeable, sure, but it’ll still be there in terms of register and word choice, though perhaps much more subconsciously than a predominantly NDE speaker’s codeswitching. What the codeswitching additive approach aims to realize is the use of conscious codeswitching in the classroom as a method to bridge the gap between NDE and DE. This aims to consciously put mainstream English into students’ repertoire by building off of their existing knowledge as the means to access DE, similar to what was proposed in the Oakland Resolution (Wheeler and Swords 2004; Godley and Minnici 2008; Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp 2016).

And additive codeswitching is great, ‘cause it says to NDE speakers, “hey, your language has a place in the classroom, and it’ll be useful medium for you to learn to participate in the public
sphere. It’s actually legit, and we’re not gonna be out here correcting your language every time you’re not using DE.” And in that sense it shows progression from NDEs as not legitimate in the classroom whatsoever, to teachers accepting and employing them in lessons. Which is a good step in the right direction. But it ain’t perfect. As Stuart (2006) emphasizes, you’ve gotta acknowledge and recognize the histories and realities behind language before addressing the idea of linguistic inclusion (248). And in this case, the reality is that speakers of NDEs are always playin’ catch-up. Think about it for a sec. Dominant English has forever been language modelled on the urban white class, so those who speak language closest to the ideal, are generally urban white individuals. Whereas on the other hand, for African Americans who speak AAL, their home language is so far from the DE norm, that their language is often call “incorrect” and “broken.” For the DE speaking individual, the amount of effort needed to learn DE is minimal, or none. Whereas for the NDE speaking individual, the effort needed is so much greater. And if the latter individual is also not white, then they already have so many other roadblocks to overcome to stand on the same page with their white peers, before language is even a factor. For speakers close to DE, just like skin color, that’s a privilege (Birch 2001; Koch, Gross, and Kolts 2001; Greenfield 2011; Baugh 2004). Thus, this approach in the classroom feeds into an unbalanced system where the end goal is always “Standard English,” and if u don’t got it then u gotta catch up and get it (Young 2011).

In addition to the unfair advantage given to home speakers of DE by virtue of not having to learn as much, there is another drawback to simply an additive codeswitching approach. For many, when understanding that they are learning to codeswitch and that doing so will allow them to better choose language in the public domain, they also realize the subversion to the ever persistent power dynamics at play (Elbow 1999). In this way, for students of color, this could mean giving in and “talkin’ white” for every situation that isn’t strictly the home, family or community, and thus throwing away a small part of their identity in conforming like so (Elbow 1999: 363; Koch, Gross, and Kolts 2001). This approach ultimately offers the paradoxical view of allowing access to the praised and expected variety of English in order to succeed professionally, economically, and academically, but it also reinforces that non-dominant varieties are just slang outside of institutions, and feeds into a process of ultimately learning the hegemonic language in the end (Godley and Minnici 2008). Thus, there needs to be an approach that recognizes, acknowledges, and legitimizes NDEs as the additive codeswitching approach does, but also goes beyond just using the NDE as a stepping stone, and further incorporates all language and varieties as equal and legitimate.

**Codemeshing**

The one step further from codeswitching that we on board with is codemeshing. If codeswitching is the practice of switching between languages or varieties based on context, then codemeshing is incorporating multiple languages or varieties into one singular utterance, speech act, or paper (Young 2011). Just as we codeswitch literally all the time, it is also not unusual for many people to frequently codemesh as well, by mixing different dialects or registers of speech. We not just sayin’ tho that codemeshin’ is just for speakers of NDE in the classroom, but we’re sayin’ that everyone can benefit from codemeshing as playing with language and rhetoric is a damn good way to make a piece of writing more interesting and engaging, and give life to the work (Cook-Gumprez 1993; Elbow 1999; Young 2011). So we’re sayin’ that for anyone, let the vernacular
find its way into the writing, and discard all the stuffy rules about what idiosyncrasies of speech don’t have a place here.

One reason why codemeshing may be useful for speakers and writers of primarily DE, rather than just for the speakers and writers of primarily NDE, is because of Labov’s (1979) concepts of verbality and verbosity. Verbality, is one’s way with words: the skill behind structuring an argument, like a game of logic. Verbosity on the other hand, refers to how “in high school and college, middle-class children spontaneously complicate their syntax to the point that instructors despair of getting them to make their language simpler and clearer,” or that often well-educated students feel the need to match the expectation of their education by putting in extraneous words and filler phrases in order to come off as sounding smart (Labov 1979). What Labov (1979) found was that AAL speakers who hadn’t had much schooling, thus far from the DE expectation, often fell into the verbality side in their speech, while more educated language users close to the DE expectation fell into the verbosity camp. And as someone who grew up with language pretty damn close to DE, and is gettin’ a college education, I can say that my own reliance on verbosity is pretty crazy high. But the first benefit to codemeshing is the notion that by mixing vernacular language and academic language, the levels of verbality and verbosity can begin to balance out. And maybe that way academic writing won’t be full of a buncha people tryna sound smart through their words rather than their arguments.

But no one would see a codemeshed piece of work and consider it legitimate academic writing, one may claim. But that’s why we’re here to say that of course there’s codemeshed academia. Check Yancy (2011), who writes “Hence, from the very giddayup, that is, befo I bees gittin into some really dope cultural, historical, philosophical, and linguistic analyses, let’s engage in a lil bit of naming and claiming. Word!,” or one of the many works by Geneva Smitherman, a leader in this field who proudly uses codemeshing of AAL and academic English in her works (277). It’s been done, and it’s viable, and people gotta learn to accept that.

Of course, verbality and verbosity are not the only outcomes to codemeshing that Young (2011) and others foresee. But rather, just as codeswitching introduces NDEs as legitimate in the classroom, codemeshing can be used in conjunction with a critical approach to talking about language that helps students to think and understand how language is present in our society, and how it can be used to subvert preexisting power relations.

**Getting Teachers and Students to Think Critically About Language Diversity**

Just as teachers can be a leading force in getting students to lose motivation by constantly correcting grammar and insisting on the use of “correct” English, teachers can also lead change by being aware of the sociopolitical, and historical contexts surrounding students’ linguistic backgrounds (Wheeler and Swords 2004; Haass and Smitherman 2009). Rather, now more than ever is it necessary that teachers are aware of the multilingual state of classrooms across the country and take steps to acknowledge the diversity present (Matsuda 2006). So teachers have gotta be out there understandin’ where their students are comin’ from, and acceptin’ their backgrounds not just as somethin’ to tolerate, but as an important resource for further learning (Godley et al. 2006; Whittingham, Hoffman, and Rumenapp 2016).
So with the teachers on board, it’s time to start implementing what Godley and Minnici (2008) call critical language pedagogy. This is a set of practices in the classroom which specifically aims to challenge dominant ideologies, identify power structures, and lead students to critically examine the ideologies surrounding language and dialects—like Standard Language Ideology—and how to change those dialects. The goal then being, to not only give students better knowledge of when to codeswitch and pull a linguistic device out of their toolbox, but to make them agents capable of combatting linguistic prejudice and injustice (Greenfield 2011).

The methods for introducing this kind of critical language pedagogy are varied, but some starts include Homa (1993) who delved into the word “ain’t” with a class of high schoolers to see how the word has a long history, and is very much so alive and well in usage, but is stigmatized by virtue of who it’s associated with. This is one way to highlight the connection between language and speakers, and how language is a proxy for attacking people indirectly. Another method is seen with Zuidema (2005) and Wheeler and Swords (2004) who use contrastive analysis methods in the classrooms. Through this method, students participate by contributing their own vernacular knowledge, and contrast the differing forms of the language to see how multiple varieties have the same function, despite some varieties being dismissed as lesser. Exercises such as these are useful in getting students to understand how languages are all equal across the board. A critical lens into how language is perceived and used in society highlights how despite the linguistic equality, languages are socially stratified and unequally favored depending on who the associated speakers are. Codemeshing brings language back to its equal state, acknowledging that society has privileged some manners of speech over others, but still incorporating both vernacular and academic, dominant and non-dominant in order to resist falling into the linguistic hierarchy constructed by the privileged class.

Finally, in sayin’ that students should be mixin’ codes and meshing language, that’s not saying that they should be borrowing from outside their own linguistic background just ‘cause they feelin’ like it. The role of the critical approach to language is that it also highlights how language is the product of sociopolitical processes, and language is strongly tied to people and identity. Just like clothing or art, language can also be appropriated, misused, and abused. While of course, especially with the internet, language patterns are spreadin’ fast and spreadin’ wide, and language like AAL is going to influence the speech of non-AAL speakers if the latter hears it enough (Stuart 2006). That’s inevitable. But to make it so that students’ codemeshed language isn’t appropriating language that isn’t theirs, they can be taught about other varieties of English. At least right now, if you comin’ from a primarily white and DE speaking neighborhood, ur not learnin’ anythin’ bout how AAL or any other varieties have rules or logic. Ur not learnin’ anythin’ ‘bout it all. That’s why it’s important for everyone to not just codemesh, but learn about America’s multilingual state, as that can aid in the respect and legitimization of all forms of language.

Conclusion

It is all too easy to forget about language and its place within the public conscious. Language is so ubiquitous, so prevalent within our lives, and that is precisely why it disappears so easily, and becomes so easily forgotten as a medium to reinforce power. English is by no means monolithic,
and the privileged variety that rose to the top of the hierarchy is one that has long been attributed to upper class, urban, white Americans’ speech. And the varieties of English that are relegated to the bottom are those which are connected to the marginalized and stigmatized populations across the country. Language itself is not inferior nor ever broken, but as people are made lesser at the hands of others, so too is language. Fighting against the inherently racist language ideologies is a struggle that has existed since the Arbor Case, through the Ebonics Resolution, and even continues to this day. The classroom is the ground from which change for attitudes toward language can take place.

With a critical analysis of how language varieties and language in institutions are historical products, of how all language varieties are equal, and of how to codeswitch to match contexts and codemesh to subvert the expected norms, the overarching goal is to de-center Dominant English to make way for the rise of other language’s legitimacy and viability (Godley et al. 2006). Students need to be conscious agents within their own language usage, rather than merely blindly accept the beliefs put before them. And teachers are the fore through which this change can take place, by being able to implement lessons geared toward supporting NDEs, and encouraging students to feel comfortable with using and considering their home language as legitimate communication. By breaking from the long cemented ideals of what “proper” language, or “correct” rhetoric and grammar is, then everyone’s language can benefit by becoming richer and more filled with life. As Young (2011) writes, “a whole lot of folk could be writin and speakin real, real smart if [people] stopped using one prescriptive, foot-long ruler to measure the language of peeps who use a yardstick when they communicate,” so it’s about time to stop limiting ourselves and recognize the legitimacy of non-Dominant varieties of English (65).
REFERENCES


