

How “Bad English Works Against Us”. Language Discrimination in the US.

Peterson (2019)



Summary

- Relevant studies
 - Lambert (1967), English and French in Canada
 - Dennis Preston (2011), folk linguistics and perceptions of regional dialects in the US
 - Baugh (2003), linguistic profiling and housing discrimination in regards to ethnolect
- Relevant court cases
 - Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et al., v. Ann Arbor School District Board
 - Court ruled that the school had failed to accommodate the linguistic needs of all the children and that steps had to be taken to help these African-American students
 - Only case in which court ruled that a school had failed to meet the linguistic needs of its students
 - State of Florida v. George Zimmerman
 - Rachel Jeantel's testimony, told in a non-mainstream variety of English, was subject of linguistic discrimination and could have impacted the outcome of the case
 - John R. Rickford and Sharese King wrote academic article outlining the ways in which Jeantel was considered a less credible witness because of her African-American variety of English, which was considered difficult to understand
- The workplace
 - Difficulty with communication in the workplace for migrant workers, language barrier may result in less work safety

Dennis Preston's findings (2011)

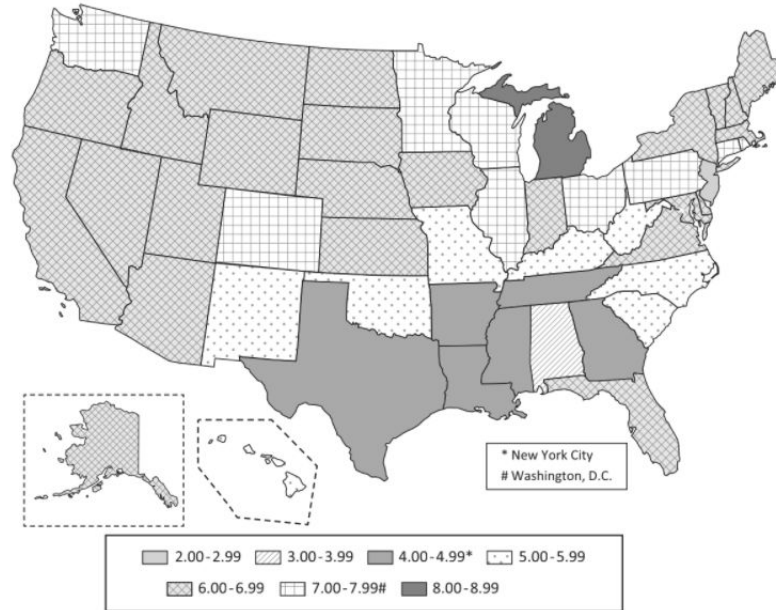


FIGURE 4.1 Mapping attitudes about US dialects. Respondents were asked to measure on a scale where the most correct English was spoken in the USA. These respondents were from Michigan, which they ranked highest on the scale. Reproduced from Preston 2002. Permission granted by Taylor & Francis.

Key terms

Lippi-Green (2012) - the communicative burden

Baugh (2003) - linguistic profiling

Preston (2011) - folk linguistics, language regard

Standardization

- This article helped me to reexamine my own biases and realize that even if someone speaks English, they might not be able to understand the English that is used in legal settings. Also, the solution to miscommunication is not as easy as just getting a translator, because that can be degrading for someone who has spoken their variety of English their entire life. We need to be able to find a standard English that everyone can understand and communicate in when necessary, because the current standard is still too exclusionary.
- Before reading this chapter, I hadn't fully realized how many advantages I have speaking a standard variety of English. Looking back on my school experiences, I've never been at a disadvantage because of my language. **A question that arises for me is, how can the school system be reformed to help students who do not speak a standardized variety of English?**
- It was really interesting to read about how attitudes towards language are produced and create bias. I thought it was interesting how the author described language has shifted from being "a property of the collective community of speakers to being in the hands of an elite group".
- It was interesting to read more about AAVE (as well as other varieties of English), before this class I had never heard of it and now that we're almost finished I wish we had more time to learn about it.

State of Florida v. George Zimmerman

- It seems like in some cases language is fuel added to the fire that is racism. Especially in a legal sense. The fact that people aren't getting the information across because of the differences is crazy!!! Especially since people on the jury are supposed to be the peers of someone, which seems false when no one on that jury is able to get an accurate understanding from testimonies.
- **Have the Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children, et al., v. Ann Arbor School District Board and State of Florida v. George Zimmerman cases caused any changes in courts or education, whether systematic and widespread or not?**
It seems to me that in light of the Ann Arbor decision, school districts all over would realize that they are not meeting the linguistic needs of students and must make a change. The Trayvon Martin case and the findings on court reporting inaccuracy for African American English indicate an obvious and urgent need for change, **but has this change been realized anywhere?**
- It's shocking and disturbing how deeply linguistic ideologies and prejudices can dictate the lives of those who speak a version of English that's not considered standard, or for those who speak English as a second language. It's impossible for me to truly understand the depth of frustration and difficulty that Rachel Jeantel experienced in the courtroom as witness to her friend's murder, and though it seems there's no currently accepted solution to the problem of communication she faced, I hope that there is a solution out there. In my opinion, linguistic differences that solely make communication difficult should not be allowed to influence courtroom judgements.
- As Rachel Jeantel's testimony exemplifies linguistic discrimination in the United States, **how should we look to fight linguistic discrimination in the judicial system and within the United States? (Educate court scribes on AAVE is one idea, thoughts?)**

(Left off from Wednesday)

- Talking about ways to make courts more fair to people who don't speak Standard American English - subtitle everyone?
- What's the purpose of subtitles (in general)? Do they create more equality or less in this situation?

Linguistic landscapes in other countries

- The author made an interesting point in saying that in our culture we would praise someone who was trilingual in standardized English, Spanish, and French, but it was seen as a hindrance that Jeantel spoke AAVE, Haitian Creole and Dominican Spanish. **Would this type of thinking be common in a place like Norway, where dialects have a more accepted place in the culture? Based purely on their linguistic culture, would Norwegians have these same biases in this situation?**
- It's interesting to hear that in the 50s/60s in Quebec that people (even french speakers) viewed English as more prestigious. **I wonder when the attitude changed and what led to that change?**
- Reading this really shined a light on how big of an issue the idea of standardizing a language is, particularly in America. While I'm sure there are issues in other countries (English speaking or not), **do these issues permeate as far into society as ours, such as having non-standard speakers affected in courts, housing, schools, etc. in those countries?**

Additional Comments / Question

- Although an unsurprisingly long list of all the things standardized English speakers can take for granted was an important reminder of everything that I personally take for granted.
- The lack of understanding of the witness from the court case is appalling. It should have been obvious that the lack of understanding should have been fixed by some kind of translator. The information she offered was deeply valuable and could have helped the case immensely. That's not justice. Not at all.
- There are so many forms of privilege and one of them comes in the form of language. By reading this piece, I was able to acknowledge and address the privilege that I have had growing up listening to and speaking a standard form of English. **Are there any advantages/disadvantages within the text that were mentioned that other students take for granted? Were there advantages/disadvantages not included in the text that are worth mentioning?**