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### Dialectal Issues in the Classroom

Everyone speaks a little different based on the region where they are from, then why is “standard” English forced upon students – often rural (redneck) students? Dialect criticism, in rural United States, is a major issue in today’s world. Researchers have found that people in different regions speak differently. So, when one is discriminated against in their own classroom, they begin to think that their way isn’t good enough. This is a big problem. Students shouldn’t have to look at themselves and change who they are just to please the world. A student shouldn’t be afraid to write a paper or give a speech in fear of being made fun of or discriminated against. Also, teachers are expected to support the student, but how are they supporting the student by telling them to change, telling them that their way isn’t right? Many teachers believe in a “standard” English language, and this is supported by their superiors, but not by many students. The education system should depart with the “standard” English being taught and start teaching students to communicate with a variety of dialects; thus, bettering their communications skills, and making them more valuable to the world around them.

Many students in rural areas might self-identify as “redneck” or “hillbilly”, by proclaiming this title, they connect themselves to a common stereotype about rural people. But, in some cases, stereotypes are incorrect. I, myself, am a redneck. I, myself, have felt victimized due to discrimination against my dialect. I, myself, have broken the barriers, and disproven the stereotype put on rednecks. The discrimination we receive isn't deserved. Our minds retain just as much as everyone else; we are taught and know the same thing as everyone else. We know different things than those from the city. We can name every type of tractor, truck, and cow –

can your typical city person do that? But, just because we use words such as “ain’t,” “y’all,” and “britches,” many look down on us, see us as uneducated. Our language is different than someone who lives in Boston, but it’s all based on where we are from.

There will always be language barriers in the world, whether they be regional, physical, urban/suburb or rural, so a “standard” English is supposed to be a common ground. But, this common ground has all these rules. Something as small as a comma has so many rules that they are hard to remember, and sometimes they give you three different options when combining two ideas or thoughts. For example, you can use a period, a comma followed by a conjunction, or a semi-colon for connecting two different thoughts. Then once you use one of these different ways, you are told that there was a better way you should have gone about it. All these rules are hard to remember. So, when one can’t remember the rule they skip it entirely or make up their own rule for their standards. People bypass these “important” rules in different ways, leading to people everywhere talking differently.

American English is a simplified combination of many different languages from around the world. Many people might say that everyone from the East coast speaks the same. German influenced Pennsylvanian Dutch, African influenced the Gullah dialect in South Carolina, and French/ English sunk its teeth into the Cajuns in Louisiana (*American Tongues* 18:30). These areas are on the eastern side of America, yet they all sound totally different. If someone was to give you this description: “what do you call something that has ice cream and milk then you shake it up and drink it?”, what would you say? Anyone from the Midwest would say it’s a milkshake, but Rhode Islanders call it a Cabinet. Who is correct? Both parties are correct, because it is their region that depicts what or how they say things. What is it that you shoot at your siblings then run away so they don’t get you back? In Pennsylvania it’s a gumband

(*American Tongues* 20:30). You know what a gumband is, everyone has used them before.

Rubber band, gumband, it's all the same thing, but because we are from different regions we tend to criticize others for what they may say.

For the most part all regions spell the words the same. It's not the spelling that makes them different, but just the way they pronounce them. It can be as small as words like "ask" or "due." Words that when you look at them you naturally assume everyone says it the same way. Richard Hendrickson portrays this difference nicely (Refer to Figure 1). The spelling doesn't change for each word, instead the main difference are the accent characters. Each time one is removed or added, it changes the way the word is said. And sometimes the accent characters just come in your speech. "We learn the words we use in our regions, the same way we learn our manners and customs – from the people around us" (*American Tongues* 22:54). Where you grew up, and who you grew up around greatly influence who you are now. My father was a high school dropout who grew up on the family farm; he certainly does not speak perfect "standard" English. I spent a lot of my time as a child around my father and grew up in a little farm town, therefore I do not speak perfect "standard" English myself. My friend grew up in Southern California, when she moved here it was very noticeable that she was an outsider. Her accent and word choices were a dead giveaway. Being raised in completely different environments, our dialect and speech were very different.

Sociolinguist<sup>1</sup> Roger Shuy explains why America has different dialects in the film *American Tongue*. "Sometimes the settlers were stopped by natural boundaries or barriers – such as a mountain range or a river – and of course since they were stopped, their dialects stopped too" (*American Tongues* 10:33). What Shuy is saying here is that, dialect differences are caused

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<sup>1</sup> Sociolinguist: the descriptive study of the effect of any and all aspects of society, including culture norm, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and societies effect on language (Wikipedia).

by natural boundaries. The Appalachian Mountains stand as a great example. Appalachians<sup>2</sup> have their own way of speaking, it is very distinct from those who live just about anywhere else in the United States. Another area set apart by natural barriers would be California. Most know that Californians have their own distinct way of speaking. California is set apart by the Mojave Desert and different forests on the northern side. These natural barriers play a part in the Californian dialect.

Now, if there are natural reasons that may cause dialect differences, then why enforce a “standard” English? In *American Tongues*, they said, “when people put down the way others speak, they sometimes forget that everybody speaks with an accent” (5:43). I like the way it is said in *American Tongues*: “There is no such thing as one standard English accent/dialect that’s better than all the others, but there is a type of English favored by actors, radio, and TV announcers. It may lack personality, but everybody can understand it” (25:08). What most Americans will know is generic English, or homogenized speech, which is made to sound like it didn’t come from anywhere particular, or the “voice from nowhere.” Everyone has heard this “dialect”. This dialect is very monotone, has no personality, and almost sounds as if a robot or computer was speaking to the person. The operator voice, and many companies, use this, but it still sounds foreign to some people. This homogenized English is very comparable to a standard English that is taught in classrooms. This generic English is not the only way to communicate with people.

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<sup>2</sup> Appalachians are rural people who reside in the southern Appalachian region covering about 110,000 square miles in the states of Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama (Gale Group, Inc).

Paul Brandes and Jeutonne Brewer believe there are four main ways to go about communicating with people. The first is “The Traditional Grammarian’s Approach: speak to me only in ‘standard’”, they explain it as follows:

Traditionally, this has been the approach used in American classrooms. It is time-tested. Standards are set and are encouraged to meet those standards. Because only one language system is considered valid in the classroom, the need to deal directly with dialect clash is minimized. Value judgements are straightforward and relatively simple. If a child’s speech is not “standard” it is not acceptable. The standard is the same for everyone; therefore, all students are judged “impartially” by the same measuring stick, “standard” Amerenglish.

(Brandes and Brewer 164)

This is so accurate. Students can come from anywhere in the world, but in the classroom, they are expected to reach the same “standard”. The other ways involve “The Laissez-Faire Approach: Speak to me in anything, but speak to me”, “The Nationalistic Approach: Speak to me only we are here,” and “The Multidialectal Approach: Speak to me, being aware there are many ways to do it” (Brandes and Brewer 164-165). I think the Multidialectal approach would be the most effective in student’s lives. The Multidialectal approach will help students understand multiple directions which involves language. One idea that the student could learn would be to embrace his or her culture. Students shouldn’t stray away from their roots for the world. It will also teach them to value other’s cultures more, because they will encounter other cultures and almost be forced to confront them. No one can for sure say where a student will end up after they graduate and leave their community. So, if students know there are many ways to communicate all around the nation, then they are more open to communicate with people who aren’t from the

same area or region as themselves, bringing humanity closer together. Brandes and Brewer have the same concept in mind as Walt Wolfram does when it concerns to what students should be taught in the classroom.

In “Dialects in Schools and Communities,” Walt Wolfram, et al, say that students should not be taught a “standard” English, but instead be taught how to confront different dialects (170). This, I fully agree with. As stated before, people around the nation speak according to their region or environment. One cannot assume that everyone knows this “standard” dialect or the same “standard” dialect, so instead of assuming the dialect they will encounter, why not teach them to be able to communicate with a variety of dialects. Different dialects come with different slang terms, so if you can respond to the different slang terms, in an understanding manner, then you should be able to respond effectively to the world around you. When you can effectively respond to the world around you, you become more valuable, in a business sense.

Not only will this be beneficial in a business sense, but it can unite the country as well. We, as people, can learn to understand and communicate with each other in a more sensible way. We will be closer to dialect equality, so we won’t be judged on our dialect because the nation, and even the world, will be more accepting of different dialects. Language barriers will still be there, but within the English language people will feel more accepted and understood. This can help students, and others, be more comfortable being themselves as well as more comfortable communicating with others that may be different than them. Instead of teaching this so-called “standard” English, we should just aim to teach students how to respond to different dialects, bettering their communication skills.

As stated before, I have felt discrimination due to my dialect. The English classrooms I grew up in, in my rural hometown, were taught by adults from the city, therefore our dialects

were quite different. The school in which I attended was, quite literally, in a cow pasture. These city folks would travel an hour or more for their work, and, without taking in consideration that they were in our territory, would jump right in trying to fix our “redneck” dialect. After being treated this way as you leave that area it is clearer when people do look at you funny or discriminate against this specific dialog.

Students attending a university in the Pacific Northwest touched on the topic of “redneck” discrimination in their own argumentative essays. A piece of advice that they had used in their essays included “handwritten letters carry more weight, due to the effort one must take to write them” (Beech 182). The authors of these specific essays had at one time self-identified as “rednecks” in their classroom. The essays touched on the fact that “[the students] were worried that handwritten letters would reinforce the misconception that people from [rural] areas are behind technologically and educationally,” which Beech loves the fact that the student is acknowledging that this is happening (182). The students had signed petitions opposing a show to be on CBS, but when asked for their feedback or opinions on why it shouldn’t be aired, they were hesitant in writing the response due to the fear that the above stated misconception would make their opinions invalid (Beech 182).

In modern society everyone’s opinion is, for the most part, considered, or at least heard. In most cases it is an opinion that sways a matter one way or another. So, when a student – America’s future – is afraid to cast their opinion, due to the fear of being discriminated against for something that they had little to no control over, this can lead to many issues that will arise in America’s future. Today, we see many “Black Lives Matter” marches and “White Lives Matter” marches, but which can be tied to language and dialect. When will students feel comfortable

being themselves in their classroom, or feel as if they can freely write what is on their mind without fear.

Jeffery Reaser, et al, has the correct idea to help student feel more comfortable with their dialect and language, “An instructional program for teaching spoken Standard English should be based on expanding, not limiting, students’ linguistic repertoires” (Reaser, et al 165). He discusses two opposing goals: additivism, which focuses on adding a standard language while maintaining a native dialect, and eradicationism, in which students learn a standard dialect to replace a native one. Being bidialectism can be a good trait to possess, but when school systems are trying to enforce a standard dialect they are taking away opportunities the student might have in the future. It’s noticeable where the education system is coming from by teaching this “standard” English, but the English classroom needs focus on showing students to maintain their non-school dialect, and still have knowledge of how a “standard” English works. When something, such as dialect, is limited, it keeps students from reaching their highest potential. Students will focus more on making sure they are meeting these standards and less on if the work represents everything they may have to say. Taking away this limitation in the classroom may be the most beneficial change for student across America.

Reaser and colleagues really hit the nail on the head, “Do not limit a students’ linguistic repertoires, but expand them” (Reaser, et al 165). The education system should depart with the “standard” English being taught, and start teaching students to communicate with a variety of dialects; thus, bettering their communications skills, and making them more valuable to the world around them. People speak differently based on their region and surroundings, and in all reality, everyone speaks with an accent to someone else. English classrooms should be more accepting to dialectal differences, and encourage the students to embrace their own dialect, and



those around them, allowing different cultures to come together to form a more unified society that disregards discriminatory differences.

## Figures

Figure 1

**Pronunciations By Region**

These pronunciations contrast the various ways certain words are spoken in different regions of the U.S., all of which will be covered at some length in these pages. Sometimes there are alternate pronunciations in a region (*horse* can also be pronounced *hos* in eastern New England, for example, and *ask* can be pronounced with a broad *a*), but these pronunciations are the most common in the areas.

WORD	EASTERN NEW ENGLAND	NORTH CENTRAL	NEW YORK CITY	MIDDLE ATLANTIC	MOUNTAIN	SOUTHERN	CENTRAL MIDLAND	NORTHWEST	SOUTHWEST
ask	ask	ask	ask	ask	ask	ask	ask	ask	ask
due	dʊ	dʊ	dʊ	dʊ	dʊ	dyʊ	dʊ	dʊ	dʊ
log	log	lɔg	log	lɔg	lɔg	lɔg	lɔg	lɔg	lɔg
orange	orinj	ɔrinj	orinj	orinj	ɔrinj	ɔrinj	ɔrinj	ɔrinj	ɔrinj
horse	hɔs	hɔrs	hɔs	hɔrs	hɔrs	hɔs	hɔrs	hɔrs	hɔrs
greasy	grɛsɪ	grɛsɪ	grɛzɪ	grɛsɪ	grɛsɪ	grɛzi	grɛsɪ	grɛsɪ	grɛsɪ

**Pronunciation Key**  
 a = as in *map, add*      i = as in *ice, write*  
 e = as in *end, pet*      o = as in *odd, hot*  
 ɛ = as in *even, free*      ɔ = as in *order, jaw*  
 i = as in *it, give*      ʊ = as in *fool, pool*

Hendrickson attempts to show that people from different regions say the same word with their own twist on pronunciation, connecting it to their dialect. (11)

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