

ENGLISH GRAMMAR: The Good, Bad, and the Ugly

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Prejudice, discrimination, and rejection, these unfortunate issues are an everyday reality for many students who speak stigmatized dialects such as Appalachian English and Ebonics. In fact, Godly, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, and Carpenter (2006) reported, “research on public perceptions and teachers’ attitudes suggests that negative beliefs about stigmatized dialects and the students who speak them are deeply entrenched in U.S. society” (p.30). This should be a huge source of concern for teachers. Educators must work together to reduce these problems by helping students create informed opinions instead of biased ones. Dispelling the myths about nonstandard grammar can have dramatic results for students such as positive attitudes towards those who are culturally different and increased motivation to learn. Teachers should inspire students to equally value standard and nonstandard English to combat linguistic prejudice and discrimination. “Why Teach Grammar” (2014) concluded that standard and nonstandard English should be viewed as “different but equal.” Effective teachers should challenge students to eliminate negative beliefs about stigmatized dialects and replace these perceptions with an appreciation of sociolinguistic diversity and the equal value of both standard and nonstandard English grammar.

In order to understand where the negative beliefs come from it is necessary to understand each type of language. Standard English, also known as prescriptive or proper grammar, has set grammatical rules that are based on historical grammar norms. Prescriptive grammar is the dominant language ideology in most American classrooms. It assists students with the development of academic level writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills that prepare them for their futures. Prescriptive grammar also leads to judgment of educational backgrounds and is limited to one standard dialect. Nonstandard English, also known as

descriptive grammar, is used in everyday language situations and has many different dialects.

Descriptive grammar focuses on how language is used by a certain group of people, not on what is correct or incorrect. Both forms of grammar should be equally valuable.

Consequently, many people in society consider standard English superior to other varieties of English. Some people even refer to standard English as “good” grammar and consider anything else “bad” grammar. Teachers can combat the myths that perpetuate stereotypes by educating students about the values of both standard and nonstandard English. They can explain the values of descriptive grammar, how it is used in the real world and empowers students to feel proud of their cultures. “Why Teach Grammar” (2014) agreed and reported that children should feel just as proud of their local nonstandard English as they are of their standard English. Teachers should expose the stigmatized beliefs that are associated with each type of grammar and have open discussions to debunk these myths.

Next, it is equally important to understand how prescriptive and descriptive grammar affects the lives of language users. Many people falsely believe that prescriptive grammar is a strong indicator of intelligence level. This stereotypical belief leads to prejudice and discrimination towards those who do not use prescriptive grammar. Some people who choose to use descriptive grammar may not be considered for employment opportunities and certain social circles. Others may quickly dismiss them because their opinions are not considered credible based on how they speak. According to Godley et. al. (2006), standard dialects are not linguistically better than nonstandard dialects but are “socially preferred simply because they are language varieties used by those who are most powerful and affluent in society” (p.30). This is a poor reason to discredit the value of descriptive language, which is used every day by millions of people. Descriptive grammar is an important form of self-expression and gives language users a

feeling of identity and connection to others who share similar dialects. Requiring them to use only standard English stifles their language development and limits their functioning in social environments. So how do teachers resolve this issue? One solution is to allow students to code-switch in their classrooms. This will enable students to see that the teacher values both dialects equally and that one is not better than the other.

Last, effective teachers should also recognize the importance of eliminating linguistic prejudice in their classrooms. Zuidema (2005) concurred that students “should develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles” (p.667). One of the most effective ways to fight linguistic prejudice is to create awareness of it. This can be achieved in many ways through media, activities, and class discussions. One of the most important things a teacher can do is explain when it is appropriate to use nonstandard language. This empowers students to feel confident using their nonstandard dialects. Zuidema (2005) stated “it is important for students to hear English teachers acknowledging that a nonstandard register or even another dialect or language is sometimes the most appropriate and effective choice” (p.672). Effective teachers should make all of their students feel equally valued and set high expectations that are not based on linguistic prejudices.

With all of these things in mind, it is imperative that educators embrace student diversity and challenge their students to eliminate negative beliefs about stigmatized dialects and replace these perceptions with an appreciation of sociolinguistic diversity and the equal value of both standard and nonstandard English grammar. To achieve this, teachers must understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar and how they are used. They must also understand the role each of them plays in the lives of languages users, and how to effectively

address linguistic prejudice in their classrooms. Zuidema (2005) urged teachers to take action and change their scholastic responses to language variation and commit to “teaching and acting against linguistic prejudice” (p. 674). While some educators may not believe descriptive grammar is important, it is critical to realize that for many people that is the only language they know. By discrediting this style of speaking, they are devaluing that person. Teachers should join together to expose and dispel linguistic myths that perpetuate prejudice and discrimination.

References

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