Introduction: Writing about Linguistic Diversity and Linguistic Racism

Charlotte Asmuth

Language changes, but attempts to police language use—and debates about what kind of language use is "best"—persist. While people seem to have a hard time agreeing on what it looks like, so-called "standard English" is widely regarded as the norm in academic writing. Linguist Rosina Lippi-Green argues that "standard English" is privileged in academic writing not because it is inherently better than other forms of English, but because it is "drawn primarily from the spoken language of the [white] upper middle class" (67). Because of this, several scholars (e.g., Alim and Smitherman; Baker-Bell) use the term White Mainstream English instead of "standard English" to, in April Baker-Bell's words, "emphasize how white ways of speaking become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norm" (3). These scholars demonstrate that people's ideas about language use shape their ideas about race (and vice-versa), which can fuel racist, prejudiced assumptions that treat language difference as a "deviation" from White Mainstream English.

The authors in the following section are responding to the tendency of people to see language difference in writing as a "barrier" to overcome or a "problem" to eradicate. Instead, these authors suggest an alternative approach to language difference in writing, one that sees such differences as a resource (see Horner et al. for more). Following recent scholarship in writing studies, the authors in the following section propose we think of language use in more complex, enriching ways. Rachel Raymer's research, for example, suggests that many bilingual students believe their linguistic resources to be an asset to their learning, even if teachers haven't always treated their bilingualism as such. Raymer's bilingual participants thus offer several recommendations for improving the ways in which educators support bilingual students.

Following Raymer's piece, Ariel Perkins and Zaniah Shobe challenge the assumptions underlying educators' insistence that students code-switch. Many teachers argue that students should practice code-switching, "in which students from minority backgrounds are encouraged to use their dialects of English outside the classroom, or only within informal contexts in school, but are required to switch to Standard English in formal contexts" (Young and Martinez xxiii). Increasingly, however, a number of writing scholars argue that encouraging code-switching (or segregating language practices) is a form of racial segregation and, thus, is racist. Perkins argues that code-switching perpetuates what Paul Kei Matsuda refers to as "language containment"—the belief that certain languages or language practices should be contained in certain places (like home or community) and that some languages/practices do not belong in academic writing. Shobe, too, calls attention to the racism behind this belief, pointing out that code-switching devalues Black students' language practices and absolves teachers from learning about Black Language. Thus, Shobe suggests that teachers learn about and "teach the linguistic characteristics of Black Language, which might mitigate prejudice toward Black Language."

Perkins and Shobe join other scholars in demanding students' right to code-mesh, or blend dialects, registers, and languages in any setting or piece of writing (see Baker-Bell; Baker-Bell et al.; Young; Young & Martinez). Indeed, as Vershawn Ashanti Young points out, we are all already code-meshing, but only some speakers and writers (primarily Black people and speakers of minoritized dialects) face consequences for doing so. Perkins and Shobe remind us that we all, as language users, can challenge reductive and racist beliefs about people and their language use. As you read the following projects, we invite you to continue thinking about what writing for social change could look like in your classes, communities, and workplaces.

Works Cited

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