

The Importance of Antiracism in Speaking Center Pedagogic Materials: “Neutral” is No Longer Neutral

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Leaders in academia have placed issues of racism at the forefront of revising institutionalized policies and practices, which has naturally bled into communication centers as well. Specifically at the University of North Carolina Greensboro’s Speaking Center, recent formation of an Antiracist Values Committee, as well as former research completed by its members, have governed antiracist efforts. As one resource to students, the University of North Carolina Greensboro’s Speaking Center offers tip sheets. These tip sheets are pamphlets that cover numerous communication-related topics from introductions to group cohesion. Because these resources are meant to be continually accessible to students and faculty, including elements of antiracism would be highly generative in these materials. However, at present, some reconfiguration of the ideologies behind their creation and language structure are required.

Intense efforts have been made over the years to maintain “neutral” language when creating learning materials at this center. However, the simple absence of overt racism does not mean that an institution is antiracist. An antiracist center is one that embraces policy and practice that challenges generations of institutionalized racism and white supremacy. It is one that welcomes the challenges surrounding conversations about race and actively works to end disparities and microaggressions. In order to understand the need for application of antiracist language

pedagogy, one must be familiar with the terms “Black Language” and “White Mainstream English.”

Geneva Smitherman describes Black Language as “a style of speaking English words with Black Flava— with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns. [Black Language] comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. This shared experience has resulted in common language practices in the Black community. The roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the resistance discourse, that was created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class” (2006). This way of speech, while not often accepted within the realm of academic formality, is no less correct or important than other ways of speaking English.

Alternately, White Mainstream English, or WME, is what is considered “proper” within academic spaces. As Baker-Bell stated, “academic English [is also] the language of school, the language of power, [of] communicating in academic settings” (Baker-Bell, 2019, p. 9). The English that is coded to be white is the blueprint by which English academic language was standardized.

The measure of Black Language to White Mainstream English can be compared to the measure between antiracism to racism. In an effort to assess the antiracism or lack of antiracism in the materials offered by the UNCG Speaking Center, a textual analysis of 20 online tip sheet resources was conducted. These sheets

were pulled from the “Delivery” section. After all, delivery is the way in which you deliver a speech or presentation, and determination of the “right” way of speaking is difficult to make unbiased.

Tip sheets were measured by a checklist in an effort to standardize analysis of these texts. Language on the tip sheets were examined individually by marking a “yes” or a “no” under each checklist item:

- Tip sheet uses "raceless" language
- Tip sheet states race or otherwise indicates the race of a character/person
- Tip sheet uses abbreviated words (don't, can't, etc.)
- Tip sheet uses ONLY “formal” words (do not, cannot, etc.)
- Tip sheet suggests code-switching¹
- Tip sheet does not suggest code-switching

Upon analysis and discussion, there are clear areas where antiracist efforts and language can be applied to a further extent. For the sake of space, two findings will be shared. These findings include various suggestions not to “over-do” expression or to minimize “distracting dress or hair” and all-white speaker examples. Rhetoric such as “too much” or “distracting” has often been an argument against Black hair and dress (Aghasaleh, 2018). Neutral language must be balanced with historic context if it is meant to be unharmful. The all-white speaker examples were used to demonstrate how to correctly use an oral citation. The three different quotes were all from white historical figures--so again, neutral intent with a harmful message. If all of the success there is to talk

about belongs to white figures, how are BIPOC supposed to see themselves fitting into a model of achievement within and outside of the Center?

This study was a small glimpse into the online resources from one communication center and can serve as an example of unintentionally harmful rhetoric. Even for those who have the best intentions, it is difficult to fully adapt any mainstream pedagogy to not be racist. The foundations of academia have excluded marginalized groups from its inception and modern lessons and coursework are no exception: “Little has changed over the past 85 years regarding the language education of Black students. That is, sociolinguistics and language scholars have for decades described the harm an uncritical language education has on [Black students]” (Baker-Bell, 2019, p. 8). While many claim vocational harm can arise out of allowing and encouraging language other than WME, a communication center is a place of student empowerment and thus should not aim to institutionalize the students within it.

There is greater benefit if consultants are naturally trained in antiracist practices, and can identify and communicate instances of racism to the students they engage in a peer relationship with. The resulting lesson learned by students not only generates strength in communication, but those who visit the center are better equipped to apply that empowerment to their own individual educations.

Raceless language as it stands will always imply whiteness. Until Black English and antiracist pedagogy are embraced, academic spaces cannot claim antiracism. Communication

¹ Code switching is “blending two or more dialects, languages, or rhetorical forms into one sentence, one utterance, one paper” (Young, 2010, p. 114).

centers and all institutions directly working to amplify student voices “can act as a driving force of implementing antiracist values in higher education systems and be places of support on campuses for Black students and faculty, especially at PWIs (Predominantly White Institution). They can act as examples of success in providing effective communication assistance” (Villano, 2020, p. 120). And they should; antiracism is an active term, so efforts to embrace antiracist values must address racism in all aspects of a communication center, even teaching materials.

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