

## THERE IS ONE CORRECT WAY OF WRITING AND SPEAKING

Anjali Pattanayak

People consistently lament that kids today can't speak properly or that people coming to this country need to learn to write correctly. These lamentations are based on the notion that there is a single correct way of speaking and writing. Currently, the general sentiment is that people should just learn to speak and write proper English. This understanding of writing is rooted called *current traditional rhetoric*, which focuses on a prescriptive and formulaic way of teaching writing that assumes there is only one way to write (or speak) something for it to be correct. However, over the past several decades, scholars in writing studies have examined the ways in which writing has a close dialectical relationship with identity, style genre, and culture. In other words, the rules for writing shift with the people and the community involved as well as the purpose and type of writing.

Most people implicitly understand that the way they communicate changes with different groups of people, from bosses to work colleagues to peers to relatives. They understand that conversations that may be appropriate over a private dinner may not be appropriate at the workplace. These conversational shifts might be subtle, but they are distinct. While most people accept and understand these nuances exist and will adapt to these unspoken rules—and while we have all committed a social faux pas when we didn't understand these unspoken rules—we do not often afford this same benefit of the doubt to people who are new to our communities or who are learning our unspoken rules.

While the idea of arguing whether there is one correct way of communicating or whether writing is culturally situated might seem to be a pedantic exercise, the reality is that espousing the

ideology that there is one correct way to speak and write disenfranchises many populations who are already denigrated by society. The writing most valued in this binary is a type of writing that is situated in middle-class white culture. In adhering to so-called correct language, we are devaluing the non-standard dialects, cultures, and therefore identities of people and their communicative situations that do not fit a highly limited mold.

The way in which correctness in language devalues people is already troubling, but it becomes exacerbated by the current trends in education. Please refer to the literary crisis chapter to learn more about the changing dynamics in education. Given this shift and the way that Standard Written English is deeply rooted in white upper/middle-class culture, we see more and more students from diverse backgrounds gaining access to college who are facing barriers due to their linguistic backgrounds.

This means that while minority students and lower class students are ostensibly being given greater access to education, careers, and other facets of society they had been previously barred from, they are still facing serious barriers that their upper-class white counterparts do not, particularly in terms of culture, language, and literacy. J. Elspeth Stuckey argues that literacy, rather than enfranchising students, is a means of oppression and that it does little to help the economic futures of minority students because of how literacy teaches a particular set of values—ways of communicating and identity. In the context of educational settings, the cultures and identities of academia are valued more than those of the students, which sends the message that how they, their family, and members in their community speak and act are wrong by comparison. In essence, it sends the message starting at a very young age that who they are and where they come from is somehow lesser.

In this sense, education, while well intentioned, serves to further the marginalization of certain identities and cultures that do not fit. This is particularly evident in Latino, African American, and English as Second Language communities. In the book *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton note that colleges like the school they studied for five years, which they call Midwestern University, do not help facilitate social mobility. Frequently, the students who entered college best prepared were those who were already middle or upper class, meaning the opportunities the working- and lower-class students received were more limited. When you look at this alongside what Gloria Ladson-Billings

calls the *educational debt*, or the compounded impact of educational deficits that grow across generations of poor minority students, literacy efforts as they are currently framed paint a bleak picture for poor, minority students.

The issue is not just one of unequal access to opportunities. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Carmen Kynard illustrate how attitudes toward students as writers are interwoven with attitudes toward them as people. Language cannot be disassociated from people, which has important consequences for those who grow up speaking different dialects. By continuing to propagate the notion of correct and incorrect ways of speaking, we effectively devalue the intelligence and character of students, employees, and colleagues, who, for whatever reasons, don't speak or write what in historical terms has been called the King's English (among other names). We use the perception of improper communication as evidence of others' lesser character or ability, despite recognizing that this country was united (if only in name) after declaring independence from that King.

This perception becomes all the more problematic because it is not just about devaluing individuals, but about the widespread practice of devaluing the literate practices of those who are already marginalized. David Gold highlights the marginalization of women, working class, rural, and African American literacy in our understanding of writing. Gold writes about how the literacy practices of African Americans in universities laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement. Indeed, the schools he studied were decades ahead of the larger national conversation on how literacy, identity, and power were interrelated. In her work examining how literacy and identity formation were key for African American women and for social change, Jacqueline Jones Royster discusses the importance of understanding these cultural, identity, and social movements, echoing the impact marginalized scholars had in academia. Both demonstrate the detrimental impact of sidelining groups of people and their literate practices by devaluing their languages and their experiences, not just for those who are marginalized but for our larger understanding of how we as a society write.

The notion of one correct way of writing is also troubling because it operates under the assumption that linguistic differences are the result of error. The reality is that, for many speakers, what we might perceive as a mistake is actually a system of difference. One notable example of a different dialect of English is Ebonics, which has different patterns of speech rooted in the

ancestral heritage of its speakers. Similarly, immigrant groups will frequently speak and write English in a way that mirrors the linguistic heritage of their mother tongue.

The way that we conceptualize language is not just detrimental to minorities; it also devalues the identities that working- and lower-class people bring to communicative situations, including the classroom. Lynn Z. Bloom writes that “Freshman Composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise.” She argues that one of the reasons composition is required for all students is because it promulgates middle-class values and ways of thinking. These values in the writing classroom are embodied in everything from the notion of property, which undergirds the way that plagiarism and intellectual property are treated, to formality of language and rhetorical choices that are encouraged in papers. Indeed, the way many instructors teach writing, plagiarism, citation, and word choice in papers is not in and of itself good but rather is the socially accepted way of interacting with text as defined by the middle class. Mike Rose and Irvin Peckham write about the tension of middle-class values on working-class students and the cognitive dissonance and struggles with identity that come with imposing such values in writing under the guise of correctness. The idea that there is one correct way of writing devalues the writing, thoughts, intelligence, and identities of people from lower-class backgrounds.

Pragmatically, many argue that standard English should be dominant in the binary between academic English and all other dialects in order for speakers and writers to communicate with credibility in their communities. This argument has been used to justify the continued attention to correctness at the expense of authors’ voices, but we can teach people to adapt while also valuing their identities. We can talk about writing as something that they can employ to their benefit rather than a hegemonic standard that supersedes their backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

In order to value the diversity of communication and identities that exist in the U.S., we need to start teaching and envisioning writing as a cultural and social activity. We need a more nuanced view of writing in society that encourages everyone to adapt to their audiences and contexts rather than placing an undue burden on those who do not fit the mold of standard English. One strategy for teaching academic English without devaluing a writer’s identity is code-switching, a concept already taught in schools with significant minority populations as a way of empowering young people. While instruction in code-switching is valuable because it teaches

students that they can adopt different linguistic choices to appeal to different audiences, it is deeply problematic that the impetus is still placed on minority students with non-standard dialects to adapt. While code-switching is meant to empower people, it is still rooted in the mentality that there is one correct way of writing, because even as code-switching teaches an incredibly nuanced way of thinking about writing, it is still being taught in the context of preparing writers to deal with a society that will use errors in speaking as evidence that they are lesser. As a result, it is a less-than-ideal solution because it plays into—rather than undermines—the racism of academic English.

By perpetuating the myth of one correct way of writing, we are effectively marginalizing substantial swaths of the population linguistically and culturally. The first step in combating this is as easy as recognizing how correctness reinforces inequality and affects our own perceptions of people and questioning our assumptions about communication, and a second step is valuing code-switching in a wide swath of communicative situations.

### Further Reading

While the notion of what constitutes academic English has remained relatively static in popular culture, the reality of writing in the university has broadened to include many other types of writing. Patricia Bizzell, Helen Fox, and Christopher Shroeder compile arguments for addressing these other types of communication in *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. In *College Writing and Beyond*, Anne Beaufort provides a framework in which to understand how writing is dynamic. In her article “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” Lynn Z. Bloom articulates the ways in which the cultural values of the middle class are being taught in the writing classroom as objectively good or true and the impact of this mentality. Additionally, Asao Inoue compiles a collection of articles in *Race and Writing Assessment* that provides frameworks for considering race in assessment practices.

In 1974, the Conference for College Composition and Communication passed the resolution *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*. In this time since it passed, there has been a great deal of discussion around the wisdom of that resolution. Editors Austin Jackson, David E. Kirkland, and Staci Perryman-Clark compile short articles for and against the resolution called “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.”

Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur write about how the increasing number of English speakers in the world is increasing linguistic diversity in “Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach.” Additionally, Irvin Peckham writes extensively with a focus on working class students in the classroom and the impact of college and academic writing as a middle-class enterprise in “The Stories We Tell.” For more on the history and cultural development of African American Vernacular English, consider *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* by John Baugh.

### **Keywords**

African American Vernacular, cultural rhetorics, Ebonics, non-standard dialect, rhetorical genre studies, writing and class

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## **AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE IS NOT GOOD ENGLISH**

Jennifer M. Cunningham

What linguist Geneva Smitherman calls African American Language (also called Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, black English, broken English, bad English, or slang) has been discounted as a lesser form of communication than other forms of spoken and written English. Our society perpetuates this stigma, remaining uninformed or misinformed about its linguistic complexity. Understood from a linguistics perspective, African American Language combines an English vocabulary (the words used) with an African grammar (the way the words are ordered and conjugated) and phonology (the way the words are pronounced). In that way, African American Language is not good or bad English because it is not, linguistically speaking, English. Further, African American Language, like other languages and dialects, follows rules and conventions and is correct and good in specific contexts.

Scholars like Lisa Delpit find that teachers in particular are more likely to correct errors related to African American Language, which is why teachers, professionals, and society at large need to understand that African American Language is different from and not a deficient form of Standard American English. The use of “standard” is problematic, suggesting that the United States does, in fact, have an accepted standard language. (Here, “standard” is used to differentiate the type of English preferred in academic and professional settings from other varieties of spoken and written American English; most writing courses aim to teach this type of language use.) Within the classroom or in a professional setting, these so-called errors need to be addressed in terms of language difference, code-switching, and expected conventions rather than a person’s misuse of English. These errors are not mistakes but,



instead, occur when a communicator does not understand or is not aware of differences between one language and another or when, how, or why to switch from one language to another. Understood that way, African American Language follows specific grammatical, phonological, and morphological rules—the ways words and sentences are ordered, conjugated, spelled, and pronounced is logical and rule-governed, not arbitrary, or wrong. Instead of following the rules of Standard American English, African American Language obeys specific linguistic patterns that tend to adhere to both American English and African language rules.

There are two primary hypotheses about the origin of African American Language. One theory suggests that African American Language is a dialect with English origins. The other theory maintains that African American Language is a language that developed from a mixture of languages used by people of different linguistic backgrounds in order to communicate and is a separate language made up of mostly English-language vocabulary words and West African grammatical and phonological rules. I am persuaded by the second hypothesis and maintain that Southern American English was influenced by African American Language, but the subject is controversial.

Linguists define languages according to their grammatical origins, not their vocabulary. For example, English is considered a Germanic language because its grammar follows Germanic rules, even though its vocabulary is largely French and Latin. Likewise, African American Language is more grammatically African than English, even though its vocabulary is English. Therefore, it follows logically that African American Language ought to be considered linguistically (according to scholars like Ernie Smith) an African language, separate from English, based on its grammatical origins in the Niger-Congo or western and southern parts of Africa. Defining African American Language as a separate language from Standard American English, situating African American Language as a valid, independent form of spoken and written communication.

Linguist Lisa Green has written an introduction to African American Language where she discusses its grammatical and phonological rules. For example, within African American Language, as with other Niger-Congo languages, there is a grammatical construction called *zero copula*, which means that sentences do not require the verb *be* (i.e., *be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being*) to be grammatically correct. Therefore, while some African American Language speakers could say *She reading*, Standard American English speakers



would say *She is reading*. Both are correct linguistically. There is also a construction that includes the word *be* known as *habitual be*, meaning that if the word *be* is used in a sentence, an action is consistent or regular. Therefore, *She be reading* means, in Standard American English, *She reads all of the time*.

Another grammatical feature common among African American Language is the *negative concord*; in other words, a double negative. Contrary to what some believe, language does not work like math, so including two negatives in a sentence does not make the sentence positive. In fact, many languages (e.g., French, Spanish, and Portuguese) include multiple negatives within a sentence for emphasis. That means that the African American Language sentence *I ain't got no time* is grammatically correct and more emphatic than the Standard American English sentence *I don't have any time*. The use of *ain't* is also grammatical in African American Language and can also be translated to the Standard American English word *didn't*. For example, the African American Language sentence *I ain't take the money* translates to *I didn't take the money* in Standard American English.

A phonological construction or sound found among African American Language is replacement of the *th* sound. The *th* sound (e.g., *with* and *think*) is actually an uncommon and difficult sound to produce if it is not part of a person's first language. English is one of the few languages (as are Hindi, Greek, and Scottish) that include this sound, and people for whom English is not their first language make linguistic accommodations to approximate or recreate the sound by using replacement sounds. A person whose first language is French typically replaces the voiced *th* with another voiced sound, which, in French, is often a /z/. This specific replacement produces *zis*, *zat*, *zese*, *zose* for Standard American English *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those*. In African American Language, this same linguistic principle applies, and people for whom African American Language is their first language replace a voiced *th* sound with a /d/, producing *dis*, *dat*, *dese*, and *dose*. Likewise, African American Language speakers tend to replace a voiceless *th* sound (such as *with*) with another voiceless sound, usually a /t/ or /f/, which produces *wif* or *wit*.

These few linguistic explanations serve as examples to reinforce the point that African American Language, whether spoken or written, is not bad English. In fact, African American Language follows many grammatical, phonological, and morphological patterns that do not exist in Standard American English. When

instructors, professionals, or society expect Standard Academic English among oral or written communication, but instead find instances of African American Language, it is not simply a problem of syntactical or grammatical errors within a single language.

When we focus on the ways that African American Language and Standard American English are different, communicators are able to better understand, acquire, and switch between both, and society is more capable of recognizing the validity of the language and its users. Conflating the two into one linguistic variety is confusing at best and damaging at worst. We need to understand and explain African American Language and Standard American English as different languages, each with its own set of grammatical, phonological, and morphological rules (even though they share a lexicon or vocabulary).

In the writing classroom, teachers can help students navigate Standard American English expectations while not suggesting a linguistic hierarchy. By speaking about language choices in terms of difference rather than deficiency and in relation to academic and nonacademic conventions, we can value both (or any) languages. Delpit suggests validating students by welcoming their home languages—and, therefore, their cultures and identities—into the classroom so they feel respected and might be more willing to add Standard American English to their linguistic repertoires. If students understand that different audiences and contexts expect different language choices and that African American Language is different from Standard American English but that neither is better or worse than the other, then they are better able to accept and use both proficiently.

### Further Reading

For more about the origins, structure, and grammar of African American English, see Lisa J. Green's book, *African American English: An Introduction*; Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin' and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*; and Mike Vuolo's "Is Black English a Dialect or a Language?," online at Slate.com.

To learn more about how to support speakers of African American Language in the classroom, see N. LeMoine's "Teachers' Guide to Supporting African American Standard English Users: Understanding the Characteristic Linguistic features of African American Language as Contrasted with Standard English Structure"; H. Fogel and L. C. Ehri's "Teaching African American

English forms to Standard American English-Speaking Teachers: Effects on Acquisition, Attitudes, and Responses to Student Use”; as well as Lisa Delpit’s “What Should Teachers Do About Ebonics?” and Delpit and J. K. Dowdy’s *The Skin that We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*.

Finally, PBS.org’s “Do You Speak American?” documentary is available online and has information about African American Language that might be useful in classroom discussions.

## **Keywords**

African American Language, African American Vernacular English, black English, Ebonics, grammar, linguistics, Standard American English, Standard English, Standard Written English

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