Teaching the Politics of Standard English

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In the 12 September 1999 issue of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Margalit Fox, filling in for the vacationing William Safire, devoted his "On Language" column to the issue of American dialects. "Judged on purely linguistic grounds," she writes in the column, "all languages—and all dialects—have equal merit." She then explains that some dialects are still considered substandard because the relative worth of dialects is socially determined, and linguistic and social prestige and stigma are intertwined. While linguists do not see these arguments as particularly new or particularly provocative, the reaction from many *New York Times* readers appears to have been outrage. In the Letters to the Editor section of the *Magazine* on 10 October 1999, one reader writes, "I thought it was a spoof"; another asserts, "The whole article is an example of why political correctness of the leftist variety is a pernicious threat to common sense, logic, science, and our basic political freedoms." It is one more telling example of the gap between linguistic knowledge and public understandings of language variation.

In my courses about the English language, I have used this column and the responses to it to talk with students about attitudes toward American dialects and Standard English. Students are often struck by the vehemence with which readers responded as well as the widespread misconceptions reflected in the letters. These students discover that they, having spent several weeks in the course studying language variation in the United States and the systematicity of dialects more generally, now possess a level of linguistic awareness and knowledge about American dialects and language biases that most of the speakers around them do not.

The focus of this article is, first, how we, as teachers, can get students to this point where they are thinking critically about standard and nonstandard varieties of

the language in ways very different from the responses to the *New York Times* editorial. Second, this article asks, What does it mean for students to be at this point, where they are challenging common belief systems about Standard English? And third, is this enough?

I am working from the premise that as linguists who teach students about the structure and meaning of the English language, we have a responsibility not only to provide students with linguistic information about standard and nonstandard varieties of the language but also to provide them the framework in which to think critically about the social, political, and educational implications of language variation. A student once asked me, after one of our discussions about American dialects and language attitudes, "How do you sleep at night?" What, she wanted to know, did I think my role, as well as that of other linguists, should be in informing the public about such misconceptions about dialects and about the harmful repercussions of these misconceptions? How, she asked, could people be so misinformed about dialects? And didn't we have a responsibility to educate the public?

The beginnings of an answer to this student's question can be found in what William Labov (1982, 172) calls the "principle of error correction": a scientist who becomes aware of a widespread idea or social practice with important consequences that is invalidated by his or her own data is obligated to bring this error to the attention of the widest possible audience. We, as scholars who study dialects, have a social responsibility. As we know, many speakers believe in the superiority (social and linguistic) of standard dialects and the inferiority (social and linguistic) of nonstandard dialects. Given the very real social consequences of such belief systems for speakers of nonstandard varieties, our knowledge, which invalidates many of these beliefs, particularly those about linguistic inequality, should not remain academic; we have the responsibility to bring it to the attention of the widest possible audience. There is much at stake here. Rosina Lippi-Green (1997), in her provocative book *English with an Accent*, argues that at this point, attitudes about language (for her, specifically accent, but a wider generalization can be made) remain the last "back door" to discrimination; it is acceptable to judge others on their language— and, as important, *to express* those judgments—in a way that it is no longer socially acceptable to do with other aspects of identity. Speakers may think that they are "just" talking about language when, in fact, they are talking about much more.

The argument that we need to disseminate information about dialects is far from original, and recent years have witnessed the publication of many important books that tackle dialect issues in informed and often very accessible ways, such as *Spoken Soul* by John R. Rickford and Russell J. Rickford (2000), *American English* (1998) and *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks: The Story of the Ocracoke Brogue* (1997) by Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, *Word on the Street* by John McWhorter (1998), and *English with an Accent* by Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) (not to mention numerous educational videos). But even these books, usually shelved in

the linguistics section of bookstores, in all likelihood do not yet reach the "widest possible audience." If, as many of these scholars themselves argue, we believe that the public needs to be better educated about language, we need to continue to do more—and one place to turn is schools. Despite years of effort by linguists to the contrary, misinformation or lack of information about American dialects is rampant in education, a fact that Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998, 310) summarize uncompromisingly in their book *American English*:

> Most educational systems claim to be committed to a fundamental search for the truth about laws of nature and matter. When it comes to dialects, however, there is an educational tolerance of misinformation and folklore that is matched in few subject areas.

This statement is addressed primarily toward primary and secondary education, but it could be applied at higher levels of academia as well. If we want to inform the way American English speakers think about dialects, one of the most obvious answers is that we need to educate current and future educators; the scholarship in these books and elsewhere provides us one obvious means to do so.

This article is, in fact, part of how I am responding to Labov's (1982) principle and accepting my responsibility in the face of widespread misinformation about American dialects. Not that the readers of this publication need to be educated about the politics of Standard English (I suspect I am preaching to the choir); I hope instead to provide some ideas about how to ask students to rethink the nature of standard and nonstandard English in productive, lasting ways—the pedagogical practice that can support our goals of examining misconceptions when it comes to dialects and providing an alternative framework in which to understand dialectal variation.

Working from this assumption that part of any effective solution is educating future educators, I have chosen to focus this article on the question of teaching *about* Standard English in a college context—and the word *about* in that statement is critical. At the collegiate level, particularly above the introductory level, we are, I believe, confronting a different set of issues than at the primary or secondary level.[1] Most of these students control more standard varieties, perhaps particularly in the written language and often in the spoken as well; they have mastered "the system," which for some of them has meant mastering a dialect other than their own. As a result, many of their beliefs about the value of standard varieties may be even more entrenched. They have invested a great deal of time and energy into mastering standard varieties and perhaps peripheralizing nonstandard varieties in the process. At the university level, in upper-division English classes, as we correct written grammar and focus on the coherence of arguments, we work from the assumption that, for the most part, the bulk of the teaching of Standard English has occurred earlier.

The focus of this article is what it means to teach students about the politics of Standard English rather than teaching Standard English per se.[2]

The collocation between the words *teaching* and *Standard English* is strong enough that inserting the word *about* or *politics* feels almost awkward; in fact, an earlier version of this piece was entitled "The Politics of Teaching Standard English." In many ways, the new title is a response to the question begged by the earlier one: how does one address the politics of teaching Standard English? My answer: by teaching the politics. By teaching students about standard language ideology and its ramifications—even while one may be reinforcing language standards in students' written work (I will return to this potentially hypocritical stance below). We teach the students who will become tomorrow's teachers, editors, columnists, employers—the people who have the power to enforce and change notions about language standards and dialects ("language mavens," in the words of Steven Pinker 1994, 370-403). And we have a responsibility to heighten our students' awareness of what is at stake in their understanding of standard and nonstandard English and its role in pedagogical practice. It is possible to teach Standard English while at the same time creating a meta-awareness of that educational process, so that students are empowered to examine the system and its language hierarchies critically, so that they can challenge that view if they should choose to—with full control of the language variety of power.

It seems important at this point to try to define *Standard English*, and this is, in fact, an exercise I often employ near the beginning of my language courses, asking students to define this concept so that they realize that while we all believe it exists, it can be difficult to pinpoint its features exactly. The definitions are fuzzy, and it is suddenly unclear who the determining authorities are. It is much easier to identify features of written Standard English than spoken Standard English, and the written standard is often our focus in the college classroom. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998, 281-84) usefully point out that one key feature of Standard American or Network English is that it is devoid of general and local socially stigmatized features, as well as regionally distinctive features. In other words, Standard English can perhaps be most easily described by what it is not. And, in fact, in practice, it is just those speakers who are *not* speakers of Standard English who are forced to be most cognizant of it and who feel its power most forcefully. Standard English could also be generally described as the "prestige social dialect" in the wider speech community (i.e., the dialect with the widest overt prestige). For all these reasons, it is difficult and, I think, undesirable to discuss Standard English with students as a purely theoretical issue, without talking about the politics of dialect variation. Standard English has very real implications in students' lives, and it is important for them to grapple with what it means for this one dialect to have been elevated above all other equally systematic dialects. It is important for them to consider what it means that when we study "the structure of the English language," we are implicitly assuming

Standard English as the subject of study. If one goal of education is to develop informed citizens in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual nation—not to mention world—then language education can and should heighten students' awareness of how standard language ideology plays out around them so that they can examine these implications within a framework informed by linguistic understandings.

While I have had the opportunity to teach a seminar devoted to the topic of the politics of Standard English, I will focus here primarily on the introductory English linguistics survey course that I teach, in which I incorporate standard language issues, as this course is basic to many departmental curricula. Given that I teach this introductory course within an English department to many future English teachers, I am explicit in the course description that we will not only examine the structure of the English language but also related social, ideological, and pedagogical questions; the relevant part of the description reads as follows:

> Discussions will also focus on the social issues intertwined with language, including attitudes to dialects, gender and language, the teaching of Standard English, and national language policies. . . . Words are one of the primary building blocks of language and by studying how they work, we can gain insight into the structure and meaning of language, as well as into the social and political power we wield with words.

This intertwining of structural and social linguistic topics is critical. An understanding of the nature and structure of language is a necessary component of understanding the systematicity of language variation. I do not believe that we can truly ask people to reevaluate the ways in which they understand and value language and dialects without teaching them more about how language works.[3] My goals for such an introductory course, therefore, include (1) that students understand in fairly technical detail some of the ways in which language and language variation are systematic at multiple levels, including standard and nonstandard varieties; (2) that students recognize ways in which language and identity are intertwined; and (3) that students understand how this kind of linguistic knowledge has real-world implications, in politics, social attitudes, and education—and that they consider their current and future role in this system (e.g., how some of them might address this in the educational system). In other words, my goals work to push this kind of linguistic knowledge beyond the confines of theoretical discussions and beyond most introductory linguistic textbooks.[4] I aim to reduce the safe distance between the material and the students' daily interactions with language, in this way *enacting* the scholarship in the classroom, not simply disseminating it (an important distinction described in Schilb 2001, 507-25).

Rethinking Standard English involves challenging many "commonsense" assumptions about language standards and dialects, and this process is not easy or without resistance. I often begin such courses by calling into question one of the most ubiquitous and obvious sources of linguistic authority, dictionaries, as an accessible way to reexamine students' preconceived notions about "ultimate authority" in language (for more details, see Curzan 2000). Dictionaries raise the question of descriptive versus prescriptive language resources; we, as speakers, seem to crave authority when it comes to language, so even descriptive resources can become prescriptive—a concept highly relevant to thinking about the power of establishing standard usage patterns.[5]

With this kind of focus on the human, editorial decisions involved in creating such references on language "standardness," the concept of Standard English is quickly destabilized as well. This can be an effective moment to ask students to define or locate Standard English (using maps such as those Dennis Preston has used so successfully; see, e.g., Preston 2000) as well as to learn more about the history of Standard English (see the appendix for possible readings). The history of Standard English effectively reveals the process of the elevation of one dialect among many, first in Britain and then in the United States. One central goal with this material is to illustrate that the notion of Standard English is relatively recent in the history of English and that the elevation of one particular dialect to standard has more social and political causes than linguistic ones.

Early on in the course, I also usually ask students to write a linguistic self-reflection or autobiography, reflecting on the role of language in their own lives. It is important and instructive for students to explore how fundamental language is to their own identities and the identities of those around them, before or as they work to understand what it can mean to judge the language of others.

After students then spend time studying the structure of the language (i.e., Standard English), I find we are all better prepared to examine what it means for other dialects to be "systematic" also and, in the process, to reexamine their and others' beliefs about dialects, to see how what they have just learned runs contrary to what many of them have grown up hearing (even those who grew up speaking nonstandard dialects). My goal is for students to understand how larger social understandings of language and variation have promoted misconceptions about dialects—not for students ever to feel personally responsible or blamed for "commonsense" beliefs about language. The distinction between "socially better" and "linguistically better" makes more sense at this point as the latter becomes something of a nonissue, with the notion that linguistic difference does not necessitate a hierarchy at the level of linguistic form. An invaluable resource here is the video *American Tongues* (Kolker and Alvarez 1987), in which Americans speak candidly about their pride in their speech and their prejudices against other people's speech, and an invaluable focus of study and discussion is the Oakland School Board Resolution

on Ebonics, one of the "teachable moments of national proportion" described in Wolfram (2000, 279).

There is no question that a discussion of the Oakland Ebonics controversy can feel volatile—which is perhaps all the more reason why we need to address it in a course about the structure and power of language. In studying this resolution, students are asked to step back from the uproar and their own prior understandings of the controversy in order to look as informed observers at how linguistic "facts" and "commonsense" notions collided. An important set of resources is now available to instructors for addressing what happened after the Oakland resolution in 1997. For example, the *Journal of English Linguistics* published a special issue on Ebonics in 1998, and the articles included are effective pedagogical tools.[6] I often ask students to read the original and revised decision (included in the back of the issue) as well as the critical commentaries provided by, among others, Walt Wolfram (1998), Geneva Smitherman (1998), and Sonja Lanehart (1998); then in class, I provide students with articles from publications such as the *New York Times*, which capture some of the misunderstandings being circulated in the media. Students are often deeply struck by the ways in which the published editorials often conflict with their new understandings of dialects and of the resolution—and often upset by the misperceptions that they themselves read and accepted for lack of alternatives. (John Rickford's [n.d.] powerful essay, "The Ebonics Controversy in My Backyard," provides a provocative perspective on the availability of linguists' perspectives during the controversy.) In the process of reading and discussing this material, students can see how the information they now possess about Standard English and language variation potentially puts them in the minority, confronting a sea of misperceptions about American dialects. And this situation is, in fact, worthy of class discussion.

If we, as instructors, succeed in asking students to think more critically about the meaning and implications of Standard English for at least the duration of our course, what does this mean for them? Does it last beyond the final exam? To begin to answer these questions, I think it is important to step back for a moment to look at what we face in teaching students about standard and nonstandard English. One of my colleagues in the English Department at the University of Washington, John Webster (2000), emphasizes the importance of recognizing prior understandings in the process of teaching and learning. One telling example he provides is taken from the video *A Private Universe* (Schneps, Harvard University, and the Smithsonian Institute 1989) and focuses on the seasons: many people (including highly educated ones) subscribe to the commonsense belief that it is summer when the earth is closest to the sun and winter when it is farthest away. In a study of ninth graders, even after a unit about the way in which the angle of the earth with respect to the sun creates the seasons, only a short period of time later, many of these learners have reverted to many of their earlier understandings of how the seasons work. In short, if we as

teachers do not confront prior understandings and grapple with the ways in which they may conflict with what we hope to teach as "fact," we seem to do little to change people's knowledge in any lasting or meaningful way.

This observation may be particularly true with deeply held beliefs, such as those about language. For many speakers, beliefs about the correctness of standard varieties of language and the incorrectness of nonstandard varieties are deeply entrenched. They are backed by many grammar books and language pundits—to the point where they seem "commonsense" ideas about "Standard English." In some way fundamental to this belief system is also the notion that when it comes to the nature of language, all speakers are relatively equally knowledgeable about the truth, about what is right and wrong; there is little or no need for linguists here. So unless we confront notions about what should be taught, about "right" and "wrong," about who gets discriminated against, about how it was determined which dialect would be standard, and so on, students' newfound knowledge about English may well remain theoretical. There is a need for linguists here, and in introductory language courses, we can powerfully trouble notions of "right" and "wrong" when it comes to language by highlighting how differently these terms mean when used descriptively and prescriptively. We can promote a critical awareness of the judgments speakers, including the students, may be tempted to assign—or even feel justified in assigning—to particular linguistic features and to the speakers who use them. By asking students to rethink the manifestations of linguistic authority around them, such as dictionaries, grammar books, language editorials, and policy decisions, we are pushing theoretical notions beyond the theoretical to examine their real-world implications and the belief systems in which they participate. Without these moves, I think that students may be more likely to learn what we teach them about dialect variation in a more temporary, superficial way; it will not shake their more deeply held beliefs about right and wrong when it comes to language.

I use the verb *shake* here intentionally because in my experience, if we can actually teach students about the nature of dialects and language standards and touch these deeply held beliefs, it can shake aspects of their belief systems to their foundations. They suddenly have lost their orientation poles of right and wrong when it comes to variation in their language. It can shake the ways in which they value their own language and perhaps denigrate the language of those "less educated"; it can shake their confidence in what should be taught in schools and how. They are forced to take a hard look at the attitudes around them toward language and toward other speakers, and they are not always comfortable with what they see or with its implications. It is a lot of work to question and perhaps unsettle fundamental value systems.

If students are truly grappling with the nature of Standard English, they also, like many of us, are left in a conundrum about how we negotiate Standard English in the school system, as some of their notions about what an "English teacher does" are

turned upside down.[7] The appeal of an idealized vision of accepting nonstandard varieties in the educational system collides with frustration about the feasibility of such idealism: how can we possibly support all languages and dialects in a classroom? And aren't there benefits to a standard variety? While we may not have perfect answers to such difficult questions, the crucial factor to me is that in arguing for or against strategies for teaching Standard English and addressing the ideologies that can underlie them, students must negotiate a more thoughtful pedagogical position. For example, they see the need to justify more explicitly the position in which many of us find ourselves as "teachers of Standard English," who want to equip students with the language skills to succeed in a system that values control of standard varieties, and as "teachers about Standard English," who wish to empower students to question this linguistic hierarchy and its implications. We must negotiate what it means if we want to argue that we must teach Standard English and also teach about what it means to teach it—the politics of teaching Standard English and teaching the politics of Standard English.

In the end, we face the question of whether this pedagogical strategy, which asks students to question the politics of standard language ideology and enables them to question the system if they choose to in ways that will be heard, is the way the system will change. Is this enough to alter in some meaningful way the many widespread misconceptions about dialects? This question has been raised many times before, as has been the recognition that we have made frustratingly little progress in terms of moving the insights of linguistic research about dialects outside the academy. And while I do not want to argue that we have yet fully answered any of these questions about how to counter misperceptions about language variation, I do want to recognize the potential to do so by incorporating discussions of standard language ideology into classrooms. When standard language ideology is pushed beyond the theoretical to the point where students must confront their prior understandings, when instructors model for students what it means to begin noticing the language editorials and language policy decisions around them, there is the potential that they may respond in ways they may not have before. As one example, after the publication in the University of Washington daily student newspaper of an editorial about Ebonics that argued against legitimizing the dialect, one student in my class wrote a letter to the editor, signed by many other members of the class, to respond with a different set of beliefs about language. With the publication of this letter, an important set of voices was added to the conversation, voices willing to challenge prior understandings about Standard English in print—not the *New York Times*, but perhaps of equal importance within the local speech community.

To conclude, I return to my student's question: how do I sleep at night? I sleep better knowing that some of the students in my classes have thought critically enough about language standards and dialects and have been upset enough by this learning to ask me that question—to worry about the widely held misperceptions

about dialects and our responsibility. I sleep better seeing that future educators are trying to negotiate their pedagogical positions with this new information. And I sleep better because we as a community create opportunities such as this journal issue in which we can generate continued conversation about these very issues and try to come up with better solutions.

APPENDIX
Selected Supplemental Readings for Teaching the Politics of Standard English

Standard English and Language Ideology

Bex, Tony, and Richard J. Watts, eds. 1999. *Standard English: The Widening Debate*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul.

Cameron, Deborah. 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul. [Particularly chapter 1, "On Verbal Hygiene" (1-32)]

Lippi-Green, Rosina. 1997. *English with an Accent*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul.

McWhorter, John. 1998. *Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of a "Pure" Standard English*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

Milroy, James, and Lesley Milroy. 1991. *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardisation*. 2d ed. London: Routledge Kegan Paul. [Particularly chapter 1, "Prescription and Standardisation," and chapter 2, "Standard English and the Complaint Tradition" (1-54)]

Wolfram, Walt, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. 1998. *American English: Dialects and Variation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

English Dictionaries

Green, Jonathon. 1996. *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary Makers and the Dictionaries They Made*. New York: Henry Holt & Co. [Particularly "Introduction" (1-32) and chapter 15, "The Modern World" (440-68)]

Landau, Sidney I. 2001. *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*. 2d ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Winchester, Simon. 1998. *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. New York: HarperCollins.

History of English Grammars

Crystal, David. 1995. *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [Particularly "Grammatical Mythology" (194-96)]

Millward, C. M. 1996. *Biography of the English Language*. 2d ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace. [Particularly "The Self-Conscious Language" (240-48) and from "The Language Comes of Age" (306-10)]

History of Standard English

Bailey, Richard W. 1991. *Images of English: A Cultural History of the Language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. [Particularly "Introduction: Standard English" (1-16)]

Fisher, John H. 1996. *The Emergence of Standard English*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. [Particularly "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English" (36-64)]

Wright, Laura, ed. 2000. *The Development of Standard English, 1300-1800*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The Oakland School Board Resolution on Ebonics

Lanehart, Sonja. 1998. African American Vernacular English and Education. *Journal of English Linguistics* 26 (2): 122-36.

Perry, Theresa, and Lisa Delpit. 1998. *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children*. Boston: Beacon.

Rickford, John. 1996. *Writings on the "Ebonics" Issue*. Retrieved from http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/. [Particularly "The Ebonics Controversy in My Backyard: A Sociolinguist's Experiences and Reflections"]

Smitherman, Geneva. 1998. Ebonics, *King*, and Oakland. *Journal of English Linguistics* 26 (2): 97-107.

Wolfram, Walt. 1998. Language Ideology and Dialect: Understanding the Oakland Ebonics Controversy. *Journal of English Linguistics* 26 (2): 108-21.

Official English

Baron, Dennis. 1990. *The English-Only Question*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. [Particularly chapter 1, "An Official Language" (1-26)]

———. 1998. *Language Legislation and Language Abuse: American Language Policy through the 1990s*. Retrieved from http://www.english.uiuc.edu/baron/essays/english%20only%20book%20chapter.htm.

Crawford, James, ed. 1992. *Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

González, R. D., and I. Melis, eds. 2000. *Language Ideologies: Critical Perspectives on the Official English Movement*. Urbana, IL: National Council Teachers of English.

Information from U.S. English, Inc. ("Official English.") and U.S. English Foundation, Inc. Retrieved from http://www.us-english.org/inc/official/ and http://www.us-english.org/foundation/.

James Crawford's Language Policy Web Site and Emporium. Retrieved from http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/home.htm.

King, Robert D. 1997. Should English Be the Law? *The Atlantic Monthly* 279 (4): 55-61. Retrieved from http://www.theAtlantic.com/atlantic/issues/97apr/english.htm

Nunberg, Geoffrey. 1997. Lingo Jingo: English-Only and the New Nativism. *The American Prospect* 33:40-47. Retrieved from http://www.prospect.org/archives/33/33nunbfs.html

Notes

1. Very thoughtful work has been done about teaching standard varieties at the primary and secondary level; for a useful summary, see Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998, 263-96).

2. The teaching of standard written conventions is another important topic, beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, it is critical that we differentiate "correct" English from "good" English (language used effectively and/or ethically) (see Greenbaum 1996, 17-18) and disentangle prescriptive "correctness" from grammaticality understood in the descriptive sense. It can, I believe, be enormously helpful to make prescriptive grammar and style rules a focus of discussion (in the same way that Standard English becomes a topic of conversation, not just the medium), rather than a given to be memorized unquestioningly, and to create the forum for comparison, be that, for example, between written and spoken language or between standard and nonstandard grammatical patterns. Students are often fascinated to learn where prescriptive rules come from (see the appendix for possible readings), relieved to have instructors recognize that written conventions and the spoken language diverge, empowered to have their dialects recognized as systematic and legitimate, and highly cognizant that there are real consequences socially, professionally, and politically to our control of these conventions. In the process of having this discussion, we are explaining the motivation for learning standard conventions while simultaneously asking students to think critically about what they are learning.

3. John McWhorter (1998), near the beginning of *Word on the Street*, makes this point forcefully, stating that if he were not a linguist, he probably would not believe linguists' claims about the equality of dialects either. He goes on to explain,

> In our daily lives, standard English is enshrined in tidy print and spoken by the best and brightest, while other dialects are used mostly orally and have no public status beyond comedy and "quaintness." Given this everyday experience, it is natural for the layperson to suspect that the emperor has no clothes when linguists say that all dialects are "legitimate." The truth only becomes apparent with sustained examination of various dialects, and most of us, after all, have a great deal else to do. (7-8)

4. While textbooks may, for example, mention the Oakland School Board Resolution on Ebonics or briefly state that there are misperceptions that not all dialects are equal, the authors typically do not dwell here, and students may not pause here either to think about the ways in which this material may challenge some of their related assumptions about language and teaching. Supplemental texts such as those listed in the appendix can usefully and provocatively confront the implications of Standard English in more detail.

5. Deborah Cameron (1995), in her book *Verbal Hygiene*, critically complicates the traditional distinction in linguistics between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to language. She argues that the desire to regulate the language of others is natural to speech communities, not necessarily an "unnatural" imposition on linguistic behavior. And, as she points out, descriptive linguists—and, for that matter, linguistics instructors—are being prescriptive to some extent in telling speakers how best to think about studying and understanding their language.

6. For example, Geneva Smitherman (1998) describes being required to learn Standard English and discusses the ways in which we need to rethink our educational policies. What makes this a particularly striking piece is that Smitherman, who describes herself as not only having conquered "the system" but having done so to question the system, raises these important questions not only explicitly in the prose but also with the prose, as she switches in and out of African American English (AAE) as she writes. She is simultaneously writing about and demonstrating the politics of Standard English with her language decisions—and showing us possible directions for change.

7. Given the three general approaches for teaching Standard English (as outlined in Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998, 284-86)—(1) replacive, (2) supplemental, and (3) dialect rights—I find many students tend toward the second. Lippi-Green's (1997) work then challenges the appropriacy arguments implied by this approach in provocative ways. She counters that these arguments simultaneously acknowledge and reject these dialects with the "message": appreciate and respect the languages of peripheral communities, but keep them in their place (107-9). The burden of appropriacy arguments is fairly clearly put on the subordinated groups, who are asked to adapt to the language of the already dominant speakers. The alternative is to ask teachers and employers to accept nonmainstream varieties. Whether students accept or agree with Lippi-Green's argument on this issue, the critical point in an educational context is that it forces students to negotiate a more thoughtful, reasoned pedagogical position on the teaching of Standard English.

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Greenbaum, Sidney. 1996. *The Oxford English Grammar*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Kolker, Andrew, and Louis Alvarez, producers. 1987. *American Tongues*. New York: Center for New American Media.

Labov, William. 1982. Objectivity and Commitment in Linguistic Science: The Case of the Black English Trial in Ann Arbor. *Language and Society* 2:165-201.

Lanehart, Sonja. 1998. African American Vernacular English and Education. *Journal of English Linguistics* 26 (2): 122-36.

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