

# Identity in Language: An Exploration into the Social Implications of Linguistic Variation

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When school began in September 1999 in Louisiana, students faced a new state law. Now they must address their teachers with “sir” and “ma’am” or with titles such as “Ms.” or “Mr.” [1] The War of 1812 began in part because the United States was angry over the impressment of U.S. sailors into service in the British navy. When the British defended their actions, they insisted that they had only forced Englishmen into service because they only took those who spoke like Englishmen. Since the United States was colonized largely by the British, naturally many U.S. citizens at that time would have spoken like Englishmen. To the British though, claiming U.S. citizenship was not important if one *spoke like an Englishman*. In 1955, Emmett Till, an African-American teenager from Chicago, was visiting Mississippi. Two white men murdered him because, in his failure to address them as “sir,” Till had unknowingly broken the social code that required African-Americans to defer to Anglo-Americans. In 1991, James Kahakua, a meteorologist, was denied a radio broadcasting promotion, not because he lacked qualifications, but because he spoke with a Hawai’ian accent. The radio station felt that broadcasting weather reports in Hawai’ian-accented English would be an endorsement of incorrect English. [2]

These four events share a common thread: they center on language. They show that the way one speaks is often more important than what one says. This paper seeks to understand important sociolinguistic processes by observing them in everyday life. The data will show that although social evaluations of language variation are often unrecognized, they have far-reaching implications in people’s daily lives. In extreme cases, as those above, they are important enough to codify in law, to incite war, to justify murder, and to deny promotion.

How can this be when language is made up of words, which are arbitrary signs that have no inherent relationship with what they signify? The answer is that language expresses much more than what is signified by its words. It expresses the “way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others.” [3] People use language to indicate social allegiances, that is, which groups they are members of and which groups they are not. In addition, they use language to create and maintain role relationships between individuals and between groups in such a manner that the linguistic varieties used by a community form a system that corresponds to the structure of the society.

Language is used to express role relationships between individuals. Brown and Gilman (1960), studying the semantics of pronoun address, found that there is “covariation between the pronoun used and the objective relationship existing between speaker and

addressee.” [4] While their focus is pronoun use, their argument can be generalized to include any of a speaker’s linguistic choices. Speakers position themselves in relation to others by using specific linguistic forms that convey social information. A single utterance can reveal much about a speaker: his/her background, place of birth or nation of origin, social class, or even social intent, that is, whether s/he wants to appear friendly or distant, familiar or deferential, superior or inferior. [5]

Thus, a speaker uses language not only to express but to create a representation of himself/herself in relation to others with whom s/he is interacting. During a college football game broadcast in November, the commentator, speaking of Kansas State player Mark Simoneau, said, “I had the chance to talk with Mark yesterday, and if you ever talk to him, then you will see that he is one of the most respectful, polite young men that you’ve ever met.” When Simoneau spoke with the commentator, he was speaking with a superior, someone who would be responsible for communicating an image of him to a national television audience. The commentator formed the opinion that Simoneau is a “respectful, polite” individual after talking with him. Something about the manner in which Simoneau interacted communicated respect. Thus, not only did he use language to express respect, but he created it as well.

The issue of respect is an aspect of the broader relationship between power and language. Power is the degree to which one interlocutor is able to control the behavior of the other. There are many personal attributes that are potential bases of power in interpersonal relationships: physical strength, age, wealth, sex, profession, or institutionalized role in the church, government, or family. These attributes of power index non-reciprocal, asymmetrical relationships. They are non-reciprocal in that both interlocutors cannot have power over the same type of behavior, and they are asymmetrical because they represent relations such as older than, parent of, employer of, richer than, stronger than, or nobler than. If Speaker A is older than (or the parent of, etc.) Speaker B, then B is not older than A. These types of relations can be generalized as “A is more powerful than B.” In “more powerful than” relationships, the linguistic forms used by interlocutors are non-reciprocal and asymmetrical as well. The superior says one form but receives another, and likewise for the subordinate. In Louisiana public schools, linguistic forms have been legislated in the hopes that mandating students’ use of “ma’am,” “sir,” and courtesy titles (“Mr.” and “Ms.”) will create respect for teachers. [6] The students say “Mr. Smith” to the teacher but receive “Joe” or “Susie.” Thus, an asymmetrical relationship is created by the non-reciprocal terms of address. [7]

Another important relationship in sociolinguistic interaction is solidarity. In contrast to power, reciprocal linguistic forms are used to express and create the relationship of solidarity. Non-solidary forms express distance and formality, while solidary forms express intimacy and familiarity. Solidarity can be achieved in interactions where interlocutors share some common attribute — for instance, attendance at the same school, work in the same profession, membership in the same family, etc. The solidary relationship is symmetrical in that if Speaker A has the same parents (or attended the same school, etc.) as Speaker B, then B has the same parents as A. It is important to note that not every shared personal attribute creates solidarity. For example, two people who have the same

color eyes or same shoe size will not automatically have an intimate relationship. But should they share political membership, religion, birthplace or other common attributes “that make for like-mindedness or similar behavior dispositions,” the likelihood of a solidary relationship increases. [8]

I observed an interaction where two Hispanic women found that sharing ethnicity and bilingualism was grounds for solidarity. Linguistically, this relationship manifested itself in code-switching between Spanish and English. For them, Spanish was the language of intimacy and familiarity as they used it in greetings, communicating about family, and leave-takings. In talking about their jobs and other (presumably non-Hispanic) acquaintances, they used English, which possibly signaled distance. In addition, solidarity can also emerge from frequency of contact if the contact “results in the discovery or creation of the like-mindedness.” [9] For instance, when I began tutoring a junior high student last year, I called his parents “Mr. and Mrs. Jones.” But as I gradually became better acquainted with them and began spending more time with them as a friend of the family, they asked that I call them by their first names “Laura” and “Jimmy.”

This situation illustrates another important issue in the solidarity dimension of role relationships, and that is the “notion that the right to initiate the reciprocal [solidary linguistic form] belongs to the member...having the better power-based claim.” [10] With Laura and Jimmy Jones, who were more powerful than me by virtue of their age, I used “Mr.” and “Mrs.” (the distant forms) and waited to call them by their first names (the familiar forms) until they gave me permission. When the subordinate interlocutor violates this sociolinguistic rule, the attempt at initiating solidarity often fails. One day when I went through the drive-thru of a fast food restaurant, the cashier greeted me with “Hey, girl!” as if I were a close friend. I was taken aback by this expression of solidarity. I had seen her at the drive-thru a couple of times before, but our interaction had never been much more than an exchange of money for food. As the customer, I had a better base of power from which to introduce the solidarity dimension to our interaction. The cashier, in a position to provide service, had overstepped some boundary, and I was so surprised that I could answer her overly friendly greeting with only a simple, terse “Hi.”

Just as linguistic choices create and maintain power and solidarity dimensions of role relationships, speakers can also use language to indicate social allegiances, that is, which groups they are members of and which groups they are not. When people want to be considered part of a particular social group, they express their alignment with that group in different ways, one of which is “talking like” other members of that group. [11] This is because “to talk one way is to be something that people who talk differently are not.” [12] Within a society or a culture, speech patterns become tools that speakers manipulate to group themselves and categorize others with whom they are interacting. In the events leading to the War of 1812, the British classified a person as an Englishman by the criterion of “speaking like an Englishman.” In their reasoning, if one were not an Englishman, then he would not speak as an Englishman speaks. It was not enough for an American sailor to claim citizenship in the United States. If he spoke like an Englishman, then he was an Englishman.

When speakers group themselves together in this manner, they form a speech community. Gumperz (1968) defines the speech community as “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs.” [13] In this definition, the human aggregate can be defined as any group of people that shares some common attribute such as language, region, race, ethnicity, age, occupation, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Gumperz defines interaction as “a social process in which utterances are selected in accordance with socially recognized norms and expectations.” [14] The “shared body of verbal signs” is the set of “rules for one or more linguistic codes and...for the ways of speaking” that develop as a “consequence of regular participation in overlapping networks.” [15] These rules of language choice fluctuate according to many variables: situation, relationship between speakers, time, place, etc. In regards to the Louisiana law requiring students to address their teachers with “ma’am” and “sir,” one Louisiana teacher said: “In fact, the people most exercised about the law appear to be journalists from outside the state, who don’t understand that ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’ are as natural to Louisianans as zydeco and jambalaya...We’ve not had a local reporter call with questions about this.” [16] The outside journalists are not regular participants in the speech community; therefore, they do not recognize the “sir” and “ma’am” address terms, a customary way to show respect in Louisiana, as a social norm, and they question its place in the new legislation.

If linguistic forms are chosen in compliance with the norms of society, then it follows that social knowledge about the speaker is transmitted by the use of those linguistic forms. Brown and Gilman (1960) argue:

So long as the [linguistic] choice...is recognized as normal for a group, its interpretation is simply the membership of the speaker in that group. However, the implications of group membership are often very important; social class, for instance, suggests a kind of family life, a level of education, a set of political views and much besides. These facts about a person belong to his character. [17]

Speakers construct their identities by careful choice of the appropriate linguistic features that will convey the specific social information that identifies them as part of a particular speech community.

It is important to note that each speaker in a community has several groups with which s/he might want to identify at any given time. Saville-Troike (1989) refers to this as a person’s “repertoire of social identities.” Each identity that a person takes on is “associated with a number of approximate verbal and nonverbal forms of expression” [18]. There are certain linguistic forms that will convey each identity. According to LePage (1986), people “create their linguistic systems (and we all have more than one) so as to resemble those of the groups with which from time to time they wish to identify” [19]. This means that a person participates in many different speech communities, which sometimes overlap and will vary according to time, place, situation, and interlocutors. Mexican-Americans in the United States occupy a place in two cultures, and this is often marked by their membership in two linguistic groups, speakers of Spanish and speakers of English. For some, to become English-dominant is to deny the Mexican heritage that is

part of their group identity, and so they usually have membership in both speech communities.

The situation is similar for the Puerto Rican community in New York City. Zentella (1997), a New York Puerto Rican (NYPR) herself, writes that when “you [grow] up in a family-like atmosphere with people who [love] New York and Puerto Rico, you [come] to feel like a New York Puerto Rican and you [learn] to speak Spanish and English in ways that [proclaim] the overlapping racial and cultural aspects of that identity” [20]. In the NYPR speech community, expressing one’s cultural identity is accomplished through the use of a repertoire of linguistic varieties. Zentella (1997) documents seven (somewhat overlapping) different linguistic codes (Popular Puerto Rican Spanish, Standard Puerto Rican Spanish, English-dominant Spanish, Puerto Rican English, African-American Vernacular English, Hispanized English, and Standard New York City English), each of which is used with specific interlocutors for specific purposes. Just as an individual has a range of social identities, so a speech community, as a whole, has a range of roles and identities for all of the different subgroups within the community. The range of linguistic varieties used to express these relationships is the community’s communicative repertoire. This repertoire can include different languages, different regional or social dialects, different registers, and/or different channels of communication (oral, written, manual). In theory, an individual community member should be able to employ all varieties and styles in the communicative repertoire, but in reality it is not likely that s/he can produce the complete range. [21]

Because of the relationship between language use and group membership, language can inspire deep group loyalties. It can serve as a symbol of unification on several levels. On the national level, language loyalty can serve an important political function. Many people in the United States are threatened by the use of languages other than English. To speak a language other than English is thought to be “un-American.” This is because English is “promoted as the one and only possible language of a unified and healthy nation” [22]. On a local level, language is a symbol of loyalty to a community. For example, last month my sister, Gracie, returned to Texas after an eight-month stay in Scotland. Her speech was filled with features of Scottish English, such as the word ‘brilliant’ used to mean “wonderful, cool,” different question intonation (a rise in intonation with a fall at the end of the question, rather than the typical straight-line rise of questions in American English), and several words that are usually considered taboo in American English (frequent use of ‘fuck,’ ‘fucking,’ and ‘cunt’ as descriptive filler words). While she was in Scotland, she adapted her linguistic system so that her Texan-American English would not so obviously mark her as a foreigner in the new speech community that she was living in. This type of temporary shift for social approval is called linguistic convergence. Just an hour after she stepped off the plane, one of Gracie’s friends said, “Okay, we’ll give you a week to lose the accent.” Of course, she said this in jest, but her remark gives insight to language and group loyalty. Gracie’s newly acquired “accent” was actually an unconscious strategy of communication. She, herself, reported that she did not believe her speech had changed at all. But to her friend, Gracie’s new “accent” was almost a symbol of disloyalty that marked her as a outsider (be it temporary). In effect, she was

saying that Gracie would have to begin talking like the rest of the group again in order to re-join the circle of friends.

Individual group alliances can even differ within one family. This is exemplified in my family where there is variation in concepts of group membership. My brother, Frank, observed that I am the only sibling of the three in our family who “kept the East Texas drawl.” My sister and I spent our adolescent years in a small town in deep East Texas. I liked living in our town. It was a source of pride for me, and I believe that the opportunities that I had in our small school and town were beneficial. Therefore, I accept and employ the linguistic features that mark me as East Texan. In contrast, Gracie did not enjoy living in our small community. She hated everything about small towns, and she felt that living in one constrained her. As a consequence, she rejected “the drawl,” the combination of linguistic features that would identify her as a member of the community that she resented. There is a completely different reason for my brother’s “drawl”-less speech. He never lived in the small town with our mother like Gracie and I did. He has lived in other areas just outside of East Texas for most of his life; therefore, he has never been a member of the speech community in deep East Texas, where the “drawl” is most distinctive. Even though we are members of the same family, he hasn’t been exposed to the same speech community norms that Gracie and I have; thus, he speaks differently because he has been shaped by different norms of socialization.

Differences between speech communities result from differences in socialization. According to Bernstein (1970), socialization is “the process whereby a child acquires a specific cultural identity, and his responses to such an identity” [23]. This identity “[emerges] from [a child’s] transactions...within...[his/her] sociocultural and historical context,” which is all of a person’s experiences within his/her culture(s), community, schools, family, media, and jobs [24]. These institutions work together to “[sensitize] the child to the various orderings of society as these are made substantive in the various roles s/he is expected to play” [25]. Socialization teaches the child how to initiate, structure, and maintain social interaction and how to gain acceptance, status, and identity within the group. Over time, socialization limits possibilities for the child creating a “sense of inevitability of a given social arrangement” [26]. By his exposure to a culture through language, a child learns to be male, or female, or English, or Japanese, or African-American, or Muslim, or Jewish, or to align himself/herself with any of the other social roles and statuses available to him/her in the culture. In this way, language learning becomes a means of sorting out one’s identity in varying social environments. [27]

For the community as a whole, socialization through language learning creates conformity to social norms and transmits the culture of the community. As s/he learns language, a child learns the social structure of the culture, learning the appropriate linguistic form for each kind of person. This is part of communicative competence. Communicative competence is not only knowing how to speak the specific language(s) used in the speech community but also knowing how to use language appropriately in any given social situation in the community. This means that speakers have knowledge of all the possible linguistic forms and the rules for choosing the appropriate form.

Communicative competence involves knowledge of every aspect of communication in social contexts, including:

knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what appropriate nonverbal behaviors are in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, [and even] how to enforce discipline. [28]

In 1954, Emmett Till, an African-American teenager, visited his relatives in Mississippi. Since he grew up in Chicago, he was socialized to a different set of sociocultural norms than those of Mississippi. Mississippi sociolinguistic rules created a non-reciprocal power relationship between Anglo-Americans and African-Americans. These rules required African-Americans to show deference to all Anglo-Americans, deference that was signaled through linguistic choices. As a resident of Chicago, Till probably did not share a communicative competence with the Mississippi community. Because he was not a member of the group, he possibly did not understand the orderings of the society and what role he was supposed to play in this sociocultural system. However, the white men who murdered him did not take this possibility into account. They had been socialized into believing in the “inevitability of [their] given social arrangement” [29]. When Till failed to defer to them by saying ‘sir,’ they felt that it was a breach of the community’s linguistic and social hierarchy, a violation so grievous that they believed it justified their brutal murder of the teenager [30].

If linguistic choices must be made in accordance with the “orderings of society,” then those choices carry social information about the speaker. Consequently, Gumperz (1968) reasons that the “communication of social information presupposes the existence of regular relationships between language usage and social structure” [31]. Because of this regular relationship between language and society, the linguistic varieties utilized by the speech community form a system that corresponds to the structure of society. Even though ways of speaking do not inherently have any social significance, communities assign social values to specific linguistic forms and codes in correlation with which groups use those forms or codes. According to Romaine (1994), “[w]hat causes a particular way of speaking to be perceived as superior is the fact that it is used by the powerful” [32]. Thus, groups with social prestige are granted linguistic prestige, and those who are stigmatized socially are stigmatized linguistically as well.

Varieties of English associated with specific regions, races, or ethnicities are singled out for stigmatization because their speakers are situated lower in the social hierarchy. Lippi-Green (1997) writes of the tendency of the powerful to “exploit linguistic variation...in order to send complex messages” about the way groups are placed in society [33]. In the movie *The Waterboy*, the language varieties of Southern Louisiana are used to garner laughs. However, the actors over-generalize the uniqueness of the regional dialect to the point that the characters sound like they are speaking nonsense. Implicit in this characterization is the idea that the people of Southern Louisiana are idiots incapable of using a comprehensible form of English. Thus, a socially powerful group—Hollywood

movie executives, writers, actors, etc.— exploited the language varieties of a socially subordinate group for the sake of comedy.

This is an example of the linguistic inferiority principle. According to this principle, the “speech of a socially subordinate group will be interpreted as inadequate by comparison with that of a socially dominant group” [34]. It is important to note that the speech of a socially subordinate group is not inadequate in itself but that it is “interpreted” as inadequate. This is because social hierarchies are dependent on the attitudes and perceptions of the members of the community, who make the ultimate judgements about social class. In a recent television interview, Welsh actress Catherine Zeta Jones was asked about her ability to use a range of accents. She prefaced her comments about her linguistic range with a reason for her linguistic agility. She said that although her native accent is Welsh, she had to learn to speak the “Queen’s English” because “in Britain there is such a class issue in the way you talk. When you talk, people know exactly where you’re from, your background, and everything.” Yet, when I visited Britain, the linguistic differences that I heard meant nothing to me. I could not place people into social categories because I am not a member of the British English speech community. Because Catherine Zeta Jones is a member of that community, she understood that her Welsh-accented English was stigmatized and she learned to speak the prestige variety so that she could be an actress in British theater.

A distinction can be made between two types of prestige—overt prestige and covert prestige. Overt prestige is a community’s widespread positive social evaluation of the linguistic forms employed by a high-status group. Catherine Zeta Jones learned to speak the variety known as the “Queen’s English” because that variety carries overt prestige in British society. On the contrary, covert prestige is the positive evaluation of a socially stigmatized variety at a smaller, more local level. During the interview, Jones also talked about how she uses her Welsh accent when she speaks with her family on the phone or when she is visiting her hometown. While the Welsh accent is stigmatized within the larger British society, it is the prestige variety on the local level in Wales. Therefore, Jones uses this covertly prestigious variety to express solidarity with her family and her native community. [35]

Part of claiming membership in a group is the ability to know when a speaker is a member of the same group and when he is not. Brown and Gilman (1960) argue that “so long as the [linguistic] choice...is recognized as normal for a group, its interpretation is simply the membership of the speaker in that group” [36]. The reverse of this is also true: when a speaker violates a linguistic norm for a group, its usual interpretation is the speaker is not one of ‘us,’ but one of ‘them.’ Sometimes this interpretation is made below the level of consciousness: the listener knows that there is something about the speaker’s language that marks him as ‘other,’ but the listener cannot pinpoint the exact linguistic cues that communicate this. Other times, the listener knows which specific features mark a group’s speech. These types of features that distinguish linguistic communities are called code-markers [37].

The indicator is the first level of code-marking, and a feature at this level distinguishes varieties but is not consciously perceived by the community. In the video

*American Tongues*, a newspaper columnist from Columbus, Ohio said that people from Cleveland were different because they “sound funny” [38]. He could hear the difference in speech, the linguistic indicators, but he couldn’t consciously say exactly what they were. The next level of code-marking is the marker, a variable that has been assigned a social valuation and is perceived very consciously. This type of code-marking was also exemplified in *American Tongues* where an elderly lady from Mississippi characterized African-American speech as “slang with lots of ain’t got no’s.” By labeling the variety as ‘slang,’ it is clear that she holds African-American English in low-esteem, and the specific feature that she comments on is the use of multiple negatives. The third and highest level of code-marking is the stereotype. A feature at this level will most likely be commented on or joked about and, more importantly, will be used to characterize the group who uses it. An example of a stereotype is the notion that Texans always use the word ‘Howdy’ to greet people. From this, the characterization of Texans is that they are “friendly country folks.”

While this is a fairly positive stereotypical characterization, many linguistic stereotypes are problematic because they use linguistic features to generalize negative characteristics for whole groups, specifically races or regions, of people. According to Saville-Troike (1989) this form of stereotyping is common because language’s “[correlation] with extralinguistic categories in a society” is “highly visible” [39]. In some ways this categorization is an inevitable mechanism for defining the outside world and for quickly establishing our orientation to others in personal interaction. I used my own preconceived linguistic stereotypes when I mistakenly identified a speaker, whom I couldn’t see, as a European-American because he “sounded white.” That is to say, after only listening to him converse with a friend for a few minutes, I was surprised that he was an African-American when I finally saw him because he hadn’t use features of African-American English in his speech.

Problems arise when the stereotype diverges from observable fact, and judgements are “not about how people talk, but about what kind of people they are” [40]. Lippi-Green (1997) finds it disturbing that linguistic stereotypes are considered “a suitable basis for judging not only the content of the message, but also the character and intelligence of the messenger” [41]. During a discussion in one of my literature classes, a character in a short story was labeled as “inept” because his use of Southern “slang” is a “marker of ignorance.” Common stereotypes like these characterize Southerners as ‘slow,’ ‘ignorant,’ ‘uneducated,’ and ‘illiterate’ because of the type of English that is spoken in the South. Lippi-Green (1997) argues that:

When a northerner appropriates a pan-southern accent to make a joke or a point, he or she is drawing on a strategy of condescension and trivialization that cues into those stereotypes so carefully nurtured: southerners who do not assimilate to northern norms are backward but friendly, racist but polite, obsessed with the past and unenamored of the finer points of higher education...Focusing on language difference allows us to package the south this way, and to escape criticism for what would otherwise be seen as narrow-mindedness...If white southerners are not distinguishable by other ethnic markers, by characteristic physical features, or

religion, language is one simple effective way of distinguishing between self and other. Because in this case differences are historical and cultural, there is less footing for an ideology which subordinates and trivializes the language and the cultures attached to it. [42]

Linguistic stereotypes subordinate the language (and thereby culture) of whole groups, races, or regions of people. Whenever there is an unequal relationship such as this, we tend to speak of the dominant group as normal and the subordinate group as different from normal. The same is true when speaking about a person's accent: "People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from the constructed norm is called an accent" [43]. When the Southern accent is characterized as "obviously ignorant" and "generally inept," what is really being said is that Southern English is not worth listening to. By extension, Southerners are not worth listening to either because this type of discrimination based on language is actually discrimination against the messenger. Furthermore, Lippi-Green argues that "there is no doubt that in the delineation of the nation, we use accent as a cultural shorthand to talk about bundles of properties which we would rather not mention directly" [44]. It is important to note that this type of subordination does not occur with all language varieties, only those where variation is "emblematic of differences in race, ethnicity, homeland, or other social allegiances which have been found to be less than good enough" [45].

Once a linguistic hierarchy of dominant and subordinate varieties is constructed, an ideology of standardization has the opportunity to take root. Many times when I was a young girl, my stepfather, a teacher of thirty-five years, would correct my grammar when I used the word 'ain't.' "*Ain't* ain't a word," he would say. How could it not be a word when he understood my meaning and used it in a linguistically grammatical sentence? What he really meant was that 'ain't' is a not part of the lexicon of Standard American English and that the use of it is socially stigmatized. My stepfather, by virtue of his social position (an educator and holder of an advanced degree) is authorized to exert control over my linguistic choices. This memory illustrates the workings of standard language ideology. The norms of a speech community reflect the social structure of the community, and therefore, the socially powerful members become linguistically powerful. This creates a social hierarchy of linguistic varieties, which in turn creates the "ideology of standardization which empowers certain individuals and institutions to make...decisions" about language variation [46].

Lippi-Green (1997) describes standard language ideology as a "bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions" [47]. In the United States, we call this homogenized language "Standard English." But what exactly is Standard English? Standard English is commonly defined as the English spoken by educated people or the English that is most widely understood or an English that is devoid of regional variation. But each of these definitions fails to adequately explain Standard English. Those persons who are generally characterized as 'educated' have usually developed skills in written language communication. Writing and speaking are two completely different channels of

communication, and thus have different rules for appropriacy. Why, then, should proficiency in writing make one's spoken language superior?

Another description of Standard English characterizes it as the variety that is understood by most of the nation's population. If we say that Standard English is the most widely understood English, then we have to examine the mutual intelligibility of the different varieties of U.S. English. When a Texan speaks with a New Yorker, can they understand each other? For the most part, they can. Yes, they will sound quite different, and there will be some regional lexical and syntactical differences. But generally communication between the two will be successful. That is, there is nothing so different about their speech that will impede understanding. Therefore, having a standard language is not necessary for successful communication within the nation.

A third definition of Standard English is that it is devoid of regional variation; however, when they are asked to identify where Standard American English is spoken, people generally say that it is spoken in the Midwestern region of the nation. In language attitude surveys, people have pinpointed Colorado as one state where the "best" English is spoken [48]. Despite the geographic neutrality of these perceptions, Midwestern American English is in itself a regional variety. Thus, it is not devoid of any regional variation, rather it does not have the stigmatized variations that other varieties have (for example, Texas, Mississippi, New York City, or Boston Englishes).

If we say that there is such a thing as Standard American English, then why is it so difficult to locate a definition of it? Because it is an abstraction that does not exist except as an *ideal* in the minds of speakers. Despite the fact that variation is an important characteristic of language and, as I have shown earlier, a necessary tool in the communication of identity, we believe that "if we want to, if we try hard enough, we can acquire a perfect language, one which is clean, pure, free of variation." Furthermore, we believe that any variety that does not fit the mold of this "homogenous, standardized, one-size-fits-all" perfect language does not have to be accepted. In rejecting varieties that do not fit our ideal, we set up a social evaluation that non-standard is sub-standard. [49]

The abstraction of a standard language is perpetuated by the agents of standardization, which in our society are the educational system, the corporate sector, the broadcast and print news media, and the entertainment industry. These are the "dominant bloc institutions" in Lippi-Green's definition of standard language ideology. They overtly claim authority in matters regarding language and thereby attempt to control people's language choices. This can even be seen in something as innocent as a television commercial. A recent Burger King ad runs approximately along these lines:

**Announcer:** Burger King's newest creation, the Chicken Club Sandwich, is so good that we had to create a new word to describe it—CRAVEABLE. That's right. The only way to describe it is CRAVEABLE.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Announcer** (breaks in with an authoritative, British-accented voice): The word CRAVEABLE is not found in the English language dictionary, so it shouldn't be used to describe the new Chicken Club Sandwich.

This commercial uses the dictionary to reinforce its claim of authority over language use. But even though ‘craveable’ is not in the dictionary, it is a perfectly well-formed word according to English language morphology, and speakers of English can determine that it means “able to be craved” because of this. The advertisers at Burger King were able to communicate their message that their sandwich was indescribably good to eat but not before the agents of standardization were able to perpetuate the idea that the dictionary contains all correct and possible words in the English language.

The final component of Lippi-Green’s definition of standard language ideology is the manner in which the dominant institutions “impose and maintain” an idealized language [50]. This is accomplished by two processes. First, there is a “devaluation of all that is not...politically, culturally, or socially mainstream.” For example, during my freshman year of college, my roommates ridiculed my rural East Texas speech as being “hick” and “redneck.” To them, ‘mainstream’ was urban North Texas (for one) or South Texas (for the other). My variety didn’t fit into either category, and so it was stigmatized. The second process, maintenance, is accomplished by the “validation of the social (and linguistic) values of the dominant institutions.” This occurs particularly in the educational system, which Lippi-Green identifies as the heart of the standardization process. As schools are major sources of socialization in societies, they “generally transmit the values and beliefs of those who control them” [51]. Speakers can be enticed by the promise of social and institutional rewards, as in the case of one fifth grade child who told me that her teacher openly ridiculed her during class one day:

She don’t like the way I talk...Well, one day I said ‘ain’t’ in class, and the teacher said ‘That’s why you got a B in language’ cause I cain’t talk right.

In her statement about the child’s language grade, the teacher, speaking as the voice of standardization (by virtue of her authority as an educator), implicitly promised the student a grade of ‘A’ when she stopped saying ‘ain’t’ and began to speak standardly. In doing so, she sent the child the message that her teacher “don’t like [her] because [she] cain’t talk right.” Those children who speak stigmatized varieties do not find linguistic validation when they go to school, hence they are made aware of the “discontinuity” between themselves, their language, and their society [52].

In educational curriculum, phonics worksheets can present a subtle attack on the phonological systems of subordinated varieties. In my job as an after-school care director, I helped a six-year-old child with her homework, a phonics worksheet teaching the “short E” sound – /ɛ/. One of the sentences on the worksheet was: *The red sled has a dent in it.* As the child read the sentence she sounded out every word.

**Child** (coming to the word ‘dent’): [d]-[ɛ]-[n]-[t]. [dɛnt]. What’s a [dɛnt]?

**PS:** You’ve never heard the word [dɛnt]?

**Child:** No.

**PS:** Do you know what a [dɪnt] is?

**Child:** Like in my mom’s car?

**PS:** Yeah.

The worksheet did not take into account the vowel merger of *ɛ*/ and *ɪ*/ (“short I” sound) before nasals (causing *pen* and *pin* to be pronounced as homonyms) that is occurring in the Southern U.S. [53] Only the standard pronunciation of ‘dent’ was taken into account. The result was confusion on the part of the child because of the discontinuity between the standard pronunciation and her own pronunciation.

It is important to note that both the dominant and the dominated participate in language subordination. The dominant group’s power to create and perpetuate stereotypes is obtained from the complicity of the subordinated groups. Once subordinated groups become complicit, then insiders, who claim group membership, often perpetuate the stereotype from within. Dominated groups become linguistically insecure and “devalue their own language in line with stigmatization,” stigmatization which comes from outside their group [54]. They allow themselves to be convinced that their language is inferior, and so they denigrate and marginalize their own ways of being. Thus, they become “complicit in [the] propagation against themselves, their own interests, and identities” [55]. My stepfather engaged in this when he would correct our shared East Texas English grammar in my speech. I observed this in my Southern Literature class when a student characterized Southern U.S. English as ‘inept’ and ‘ignorant’ even though she speaks a variety of Southern English herself. Moreover, I have caught myself participating in the subordination of my variety many times by saying things like, “I sound like such a hick” whenever my vowels lengthen or whenever my vowel /aI/ monophthongizes (as when *fire* is pronounced as a one-syllable word).

According to Inglehart and Woodward (1967), problems arise in linguistically diverse societies when “social mobility is blocked because of membership in a given language group” [56]. In 1991, James Kahakua, a bilingual speaker of English and Hawai’ian Creole English, was denied a promotion for a job where he would be required to read prepared reports on the radio. He was not denied based on lack of qualifications, but because he spoke English with a Hawai’ian accent [57]. In regards to Hawai’ians and other peripheralized groups (for instance, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans), Lippi-Green argues that discrimination “which centers on language, but which has more in actual terms to do with race, is an established practice”:

We do not, cannot under our laws, ask people to change the color of their skin, their religion, their gender, but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world. [58]

Accent, when it is a marker of race, becomes an especially powerful “litmus test for exclusion” [59]. In the U.S. there is a widely espoused belief that speaking non-standard English causes low socioeconomic status and that learning “good” English will remove class boundaries and prejudice. Members of subordinated groups are told that they must assimilate to mainstream (i.e. European-American) norms if they desire success. This sets up an internal conflict that Smitherman (1995) calls “a linguistic push-pull, an ethnolinguistic, cultural ambivalence” [60]. Speakers must decide if the benefits of assimilation will outweigh the disadvantages of losing solidarity (i.e. “fitting in”) with

their cultural group. This is the case with being Mexican-American where “the Anglos expect you to speak perfect English” [61]. Ironically, it is not enough for them to “become bilingual; they must learn the *right* English [and] the right U.S. culture”—white, European-American English. Because of the relationship between one’s language and one’s identity, asking someone to change his language is asking him to change some aspect of himself. In demanding that minority groups lose their accents, the majority group is essentially “making a negative statement about the social identities that subordinated language groups construct for themselves” [62].

Linguistic variation is a tool for us to “construct ourselves as social beings, to signal who we are and who we are not and cannot be” [63]. We use this tool to create and maintain role relationships by expressing power and solidarity. Linguistic choices signal our group membership, and communicative competence within speech communities is acquired through socialization. Furthermore, linguistic hierarchies reflect social structure, so the language of socially subordinate groups is stigmatized. This creates the ideology of a standard language, which allows the belief that one variety of language is superior to others. Once this variety is held up as an ideal, then those groups whose language represents cultural differences found to be less than good enough are expected to assimilate to the dominant, mainstream norms. In these ways, something as seemingly simple as the way one speaks can have very important implications for one’s daily life. Despite the arbitrariness of the language, the state of Louisiana was able to legislate terms of address; Britain and the U.S. went to war over issues of language and nationality; Emmett Till was murdered; and James Kahakua was denied career advancement—all because of the social values that we assign to linguistic variation.

## Notes

\* This paper is a term paper that was written for a Directed Studies course (independent study) at Texas A&M University. The course goal was to research and understand issues of language and identity and how those issues exist/play out in my everyday world; hence, much of the data is anecdotal data from observations made in my daily life. For four months, I kept a dialect journal where I recorded communicative events that I encountered as a participant-observer. With everything from conversation to television and radio to unspoken communication, the journal entries recorded a full range of communicative events. The journal served as a data source and was analyzed according to sociolinguistic models.

[1] Victoria Loe Hicks, "Louisiana law seeking 'politeness' gets mixed reviews," *Bryan-College Station Eagle* 15 Nov. 1999: A1+.

[2] Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 31.

[3] *Ibid.*, 31

[4] Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," *Style in Language*. ed. T.A. Sebeok (Boston: MIT Press, 1960), 253-76. Reprinted in *Language and Social Context*, ed. P.P. Giglioli (London: Penguin, 1972), 255.

[5] J. Gumperz, "The Speech Community," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Macmillan, 1968), 381-86. Reprinted in *Language and Social Context*, ed. P.P. Giglioli (London: Penguin, 1972), 220.

[6] Hicks, *op. cit.*, A1.

[7] Brown and Gilman, *op. cit.*, 255, 257.

[8] *Ibid.*, 258.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, 261.

[11] Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, *American English* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 33.

[12] W. Murchison, "Our charming speech is gone with the wind," *Dallas Morning News* 13 Mar. 1996.

[13] Gumperz, *op. cit.*, 219.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Ana Celia Zentella, *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997) 179.

[16] Hicks, *op. cit.*, A2.

[17] Brown and Gilman, *op. cit.*, 276-7.

- [18] Muriel Saville-Troike, *The Ethnography of Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989) 20.
- [19] Robert B. LePage, "Acts of Identity," *English Today* 8 (1986): 23.
- [20] Zentella, *op. cit.*, 40
- [21] Saville-Troike, *op. cit.*, 49; Zentella, *op. cit.*, 41.
- [22] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 217
- [23] Basil Bernstein, "Social Class, Language, and Socialization," *Class, Codes and Control Volume I: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language*. Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1970. Reprinted in *Language and Social Context*, ed. P.P. Giglioli (London: Penguin, 1972) 162.
- [24] Sonia L. Lanehart, "The Language of Identity," *Journal of English Linguistics* 24 (1996): 323.
- [25] Bernstein, *op. cit.*, 162
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] Saville-Troike, *op. cit.*, 230-235
- [28] *Ibid.*, 21
- [29] Bernstein, *op. cit.*, 162
- [30] This conclusion is drawn from statements made by the men who admitted to murdering Till in interviews that can be seen in the documentary *The Fifties: The Rage Within*.
- [31] Gumperz, *op. cit.*, 220
- [32] Suzanne Romaine, *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 19.
- [33] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 30
- [34] Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, *op. cit.*, 6
- [35] *Ibid.*
- [36] Brown and Gilman, *op. cit.*, 276
- [37] Labov (1972) calls these linguistic variables.
- [38] *American Tongues* is a documentary that discusses and exemplifies varieties of American English.
- [39] Saville-Troike, *op. cit.*, 194
- [40] *Ibid.*, 195
- [41] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 180
- [42] *Ibid.*, 215-216

- [43] M.J. Matsuda, "Voice of America: Accent, Antidiscrimination law, and a Jurisprudence for the Last Reconstruction," *Yale Law Journal* 100 (1991): 1361.
- [44] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 215
- [45] *Ibid.*, 240
- [46] *Ibid.*, 59; Gumperz, *op. cit.*, 219
- [47] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 64
- [48] Dennis Preston, *Perceptual Dialectology: Nonlinguists' Views of Areal Linguistics* (Dordrecht and Providence RI: Foris Pubs, 1989) 54.
- [49] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 44-5, 60
- [50] *Ibid.*, 65
- [51] Saville-Troike, *op. cit.*, 260
- [52] Bernstein, *op. cit.*, 173; Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 65
- [53] Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, *op. cit.*, 71
- [54] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 174
- [55] *Ibid.*, 66
- [56] R.F. Inglehart and M. Woodward, "Language Conflicts and Political Community," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10 (1967): 27-40, 45. Reprinted in *Language and Social Context*, ed. P.P. Giglioli (London: Penguin, 1972), 359.
- [57] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 44
- [58] *Ibid.*, 228, 63
- [59] *Ibid.*, 228
- [60] Geneva Smitherman, "Testifyin, Sermonizin, and Signifyin: Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the African American Verbal Tradition," *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas*, ed. Geneva Smitherman (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1995) 238.
- [61] This attitude was expressed by a Mexican-American character in the motion picture *Selena*.
- [62] Lippi-Green, *op. cit.*, 234-5
- [63] *Ibid.*, 63