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WRITING CENTERS
AND THE NEW RACISM

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Edited by

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BIAS IN THE WRITING CENTER
Tutor Perceptions of African American Language

Nancy Effinger Wilson

Those who control political power also influence the standards by which languages are judged, supported, and advanced within educational academies.

John Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics*

In *The Study of Literature*, George Watson (1968) notes that "Tibetan tea, which is partly composed of rancid butter, is revolting to Western tastes if considered as tea but acceptable if considered as soup" (73). Watson uses this example as commentary on the influence of reader expectation upon reader reaction. It is also an apt corollary to my discussion of African American Language (AAL) in that the westerners' taxonomy for what tea *should be* shapes their reaction to alternatives (note that they find the tea not simply different but "disgusting") just as a belief in what English *should be* has, at least in the past, shaped educators' reactions to AAL (also found not simply different but "ignorant").

The success of academics such as Geneva Smitherman, H. Samy Alim, and bell hooks, who all use AAL in their scholarly writing, suggests that the academy has budged somewhat in its stigmatization of AAL. Certainly the increase in research into AAL is an encouraging sign. As a writing center director, I was particularly curious if tutors, so often portrayed as interlocutors who shuttle between the academy and the student population with openness and acceptance, recognize and acknowledge AAL as a valid English.

To tease out tutor attitudes toward AAL, I surveyed 144 faculty members and tutors, asking them to rate the extent to which various sentences bothered them (a rating of one signified "not at all bothersome" and five "extremely bothersome") and to comment on those rankings.

Five of the fifteen sentences included AAL markers; five included boundary violations, wrong word, and punctuation errors; and five included language use typical of certain English Language Learners (ELL), such as missing articles and syntax problems (see table 1).

Although ratings often differed significantly between participants, when analyzed in conjunction with participant comments, certain patterns surfaced, most notably a clear bias against AAL. Even more alarming, AAL markers became indicators of some fundamental flaw in the writer. For example, in the survey, tutors wrote of AAL sentences, "This sounds like a two year old talking," and "This sentence appears childish and unprofessional." In contrast, when respondents sensed the writer was an English Language Learner (ELL), both faculty members and tutors were forgiving of any deviations from Edited American English (EAE). Clearly the issue was not simply the English used, but the individuals associated with that English variety.

The pedagogical ramifications of this conflation of writing/writer and the denigration of AAL markers/writers are serious. John Russell Rickford (1999) notes that negative reactions to AAL lead teachers to hold "low expectations of such students, to assign them inappropriately to learning disabled or special education classes, and to otherwise stunt their academic performance" (283). All of these actions stem from an assumption that an AAL speaker/writer lacks intelligence, a clearly unfounded assumption but one that some of my survey participants also voiced.

This chapter is intended to encourage writing center staff—tutors but also administrators and trainers—to examine their attitudes towards AAL. Even if one ultimately chooses to advocate EAE because the academy demands it, that choice should be made transparent to the client, with an emphasis on the validity of AAL. I'm sure we all agree that condescending attitudes towards AAL and AAL speakers/writers serve no pedagogical function whatsoever, and we need to analyze why this would occur, especially among tutors.

SURVEY OF LANGUAGE ATTITUDE RESEARCH

The correlation between how an individual speaks/writes and the bias others demonstrate toward that individual is well documented. Indeed, Aristotle's *ethos* hinges on how hearers' perception of the speaker affects the speaker's argument. In 1969, G. Richard Tucker and Wallace E. Lambert asked participants to listen to a variety of English speakers and

to make judgments regarding each speaker's upbringing, intelligence, friendliness, education, disposition, speech, trustworthiness, ambition, faith in God, talent, character, determination, honesty, personality, and considerateness. They found a nearly unanimous perception of the Network speakers (European American, educated) as having the most favorable profile of traits. Four years later, Bruce Fraser (1973) replicated the Tucker and Lambert experiment (with minor variations) with similar results: the students from an all-black southern college in Mississippi received the lowest marks in those same categories.

Unfortunately, teachers have been found to exhibit similar prejudices. Orlando Taylor (1973) discovered that teachers of all races held negative attitudes towards nonstandard dialects, especially so in schools with only European American children. However, teachers in predominantly black schools and teachers in schools with mixed student populations had significantly more positive attitudes toward nonstandard dialects and AAL than teachers in schools with predominantly European American student populations.

More recently, research by Theresa A. Bennerson-Mohamed (2002) and H. Samy Alim (2006) has revealed that while some pockets of acceptance for AAL exist, by and large whites use this notion of "standard" English both as a way to grant privilege to (some) whites and deny it to others. For example, Bennerson-Mohamed (2002) administered a twenty-five-question Language Attitude Survey to twenty-three full-time and thirty part-time faculty in the SUNY-Binghamton English department. Of these participants, 65.2 percent strongly disagreed that "Ebonics (Black English)" is an inferior language, 8.7 percent mildly disagreed, and 26.1 percent were neutral; no one marked "mildly agree" or "strongly agree" (91). Although the survey revealed general acceptance of "Ebonics," Bennerson-Mohamed is cautious, noting that the faculty "may embrace language variation for all of its richness and variety but that is where it ends" (111). In particular, Bennerson-Mohamed found that even though the faculty members acknowledged the value of "Ebonics" for African Americans, in interviews they noted it was the English teacher's duty to teach and enforce the distinction between "correct" English and "substandard" English. Similarly, Alim (2006), researching in the 1990s, found that the high-school teachers he observed in Philadelphia consistently spoke of their black students' spoken language as something to "eradicate" and "combat" (59). Alim notes:

What we have, then, for a "standard" in the U.S. is nothing short of the imposition of white linguistic norms and ways of speaking in the service of granting access to resources to whites and denying those same resources to as many others as possible, including poor whites (linguistic supremacy operates similarly for varieties of a language as well as languages other than the dominant language, whatever that may be). (67)

In fact, AAL's stigmatization has been proven so often that further research would seem to be moot at this point. However, previous studies may be outdated, and none investigate whether such stigmatization occurs in the writing center setting as well. I wanted to test Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski's (1999) assertion in "Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center" that writing center tutors' liminal positions as instructors and students place them in "a unique position to teach marginalized students how to negotiate diverse discourses" (53). Or, instead, do writing center tutors stigmatize AAL and its speakers just as classroom teachers do?

In an earlier study I administered, forty-one English instructors evaluated written, nonstandard Englishes (African American Language, English as a Second/Foreign Language, and nonstandard European American English). The instructors' ratings averaged 3.67 on a five-point Likert scale. The overall "most bothersome" sentences were AAL, with a mean score of 3.83. The ELL sentences received a mean score of 3.52, the "least bothersome." The nonstandard European American English sentences fell in the middle with a mean score of 3.59. However, instructors' scores covered the complete range of one to five for any given sentence, undermining the notion of one true "standard."

When I administered the same survey to 103 writing center tutors across the United States, I found that the tutors' ratings resembled those of the faculty. Such a finding is not surprising given that tutors typically acquire their tutoring positions precisely because they are aligned with "accepted" academic discourse, with Bruffee's "conversation of mankind." Furthermore, that alignment yields benefits that tutors may not wish to have challenged. Even so, I was surprised by the number of tutors who reacted to AAL with indignation, superiority, even anger, as though others' deviations from EAE were an affront to the tutors personally, whereas ELL errors were forgiven and excused.

I say I was surprised by the findings, but in actuality it wasn't so long ago that I held a similar bias. Even in my creation of this survey, I should have included sentences in correct EAE in order to remove the

insinuation that all the survey sentences (including AAL sentences) contained "error." Intellectually I know correct AAL is not the same thing as "error." As Ralph W. Fasold (2005) explains in "Distinctive Linguistic Characteristics of Black English," "the differences between Standard English and Black English are in no sense careless deteriorations from Standard English. Rather these speech forms conform to grammar and pronunciation rules which are just as rigorous as any rule in a grammar text" (33).

Why, then, did I not catch this slippage? I can claim I was using the taxonomy of my targeted population—deviations from EAE have been associated with "errors" in the past. I can also claim I wanted to see how individuals weighted different deviations from EAE, so why would I include "standard" sentences? However, such explanations suggest a consciousness of my actions that I did not actually possess.

In actuality, I believe my misstep comes from my twenty years of teaching experience as a white woman in a predominantly white university. Just as I cringe when I hear "if I was" instead of "if I were," I have trouble not reacting negatively to a sentence such as "he be going," even though I know this form is standard AAL. It boils down to the fact that AAL is not my language, and I preserve my position of authority, perhaps even a feeling of superiority, by privileging EAE. Thus, despite my honest and earnest attempt to show others' bias against AAL, I demonstrated bias.

In this respect, I am not alone. Marcyliena Morgan (2005), in "Theories and Politics in African American English," notes that the controversy often accompanying research on African American language varieties "reflects the multilayered political and ideological issues embodying scholarly work with any marginalized group that is marked by language use. It also introduces the problematic of both researchers and/or members as social actors in this process" (241–42). For this reason, I am encouraged by the fact that a few tutors did rate the AAL sentences as "not at all bothersome." I believe they saw past my flawed survey design and rejected the view of AAL as error. With a different survey instrument, perhaps more individuals would have come to that same realization.

So, a significant question arises: Does my mistake nullify my study? I don't believe so. The participants' comments are, I believe, honest reflections of their feelings toward deviations from EAE and toward the students who use deviations in their writing. Moreover, even the leading nature of my survey cannot be blamed for the degree of anger exhibited

toward AAL sentences/writers, and emotion spared ELL sentences/writers. Such a finding supports the argument that EAE is a racialized standard, an important step in understanding and preventing racism, albeit unintentional, in the writing center.

STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH (SAE)/EDITED AMERICAN ENGLISH (EAE)

Because this study is based upon deviations from so-called Standard American English (spoken), and Edited American English (written), the terms should be defined and problematized. Peter Trudgill (1999) offers a linguist's perspective of SAE/EAE, acknowledging that "standard" is a socially constructed concept reliant on public perception rather than a language truth, and "Standard English is thus not the English language but simply one variety of it" (118). In fact, according to Wiley and Lukes (1996, 526), standard English ideologies in the United States perpetuate the European American hegemony and serve as gatekeepers, as is the case with standardized exams. As a result, EAE becomes a type of "social capital facilitating access to education, good grades, competitive test scores, employment, public office, and economic advantages for those who have mastered the standard language" (515).

These scholars' insights inform this study in that although the sentences being evaluated contained deviations from the "standard," this researcher understands that this is an arbitrary determination. Despite the arbitrariness of the term "Standard American English," the myth of some ideal English nevertheless holds tremendous power over instructors of English and demands interrogation.

THE STUDY

This survey was initially administered to forty-one English faculty members and then to 103 writing center tutors from across the United States, 64 percent of whom were undergraduate tutors; 24 percent graduate tutors; 5 percent faculty tutors; and 7 percent "other." The fifteen sentences in this survey reflect what Wiley and Lukes (1996) cite as presumed indicators of "underprepared" students: they are "likely to be 'nonnative' speakers of English or students of 'limited' English proficiency. Some are likely to be foreign born, and others are 'dialect' speakers of American English or of other World Englishes, or monolingual speakers of English 'who just never learned to write'" (513). The following table shows the breakdown of sentences in my survey:

TABLE 1
Breakdown of survey sentences

ELL	Nonstandard European American English	AAL
#2 Missing article	#1 Wrong word	#6 Zero copula
#4 Wrong article	#5 Fused sentence	#14 A.in't
#11 Wrong pronoun	#12 Fragment	#18 Multiple negations
#15 Syntax	#13 Non-restrictive comma	#21 be+verb+ing
#24 Misplaced adjective	#16 Missing apostrophe	#23 Demonstrative "them"

After rating each sentence on a Likert scale, respondents could include a comment. These comments fell into three categories: (1) concession for ELL writers; (2) condemnation of poorly prepared, lazy students; and (3) allowance for AAL, but not in academic writing.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In a 1996 America Online poll seeking people's comments on "Ebonics," "the vast majority of . . . responses were not just negative, they were caustic. Ebonics was vilified as 'disgusting black street slang,' 'incorrect and substandard,' 'nothing more than ignorance,' 'lazy English,' 'bastardized English,' 'the language of illiteracy,' and 'this most ridiculous made-up language'" (Rickford and Rickford 2000, 6). The instructors' and tutors' comments in my study similarly conveyed such disdain, not only for the sentences in the survey but also for the individuals who might write them:

- "I hate this!" (faculty)
- "Apostrophe issues are my pet peeve. Again, students often come not understanding or not applying the rules of punctuation." (faculty)
- "How often does the student make errors easily fixed by opening a dictionary? It's a good word to screw up. . . . Better than 'Granite, I new better.' It could be a sign of growth; more likely, however, it's laziness." (faculty)
- "Run-on sentences infuriate me." (tutor)
- "The sentence appears sloppy and is difficult to understand." (tutor)

Note the parallel between the "Ebonics" comments from America Online and the comments from this study: disgust, anger, superiority. One might therefore assume that the comments from my survey were directed toward the most stigmatized sentences in the survey, those written in AAL ("Ebonics"). In fact, the comments were directed toward sentences from nonstandard EAE, patterns not associated with a specific race.

I open my discussion with this particular point in order to emphasize that, even if standard American English is hegemonic and racist (see earlier discussion), the participants' responses cannot be explained solely as a reaction to the student's race. Anyone who violates the rules of EAE is decreed "nonstandard," including European Americans.

I also should note that the tutors' overall ratings were lower than the faculty members' ratings, reflecting less concern with surface issues. As one tutor replied repeatedly, "We are taught as undergraduates that this is a lower-level concern. I have trained myself to ignore these small problems until the content and other higher-order concerns have been addressed." Indeed, many tutors stated their criteria for judging an error had to do with deciding whether or not the reader can understand the sentence's meaning:

- "I understand it [fragment]."
- "This [fused sentence] is not as important because the meaning is still clear."
- "[Missing apostrophe] doesn't affect meaning."
- "To confuse prescience with precedence is a problem, but not too serious. Word confusion happens."

Such attention to global issues of rhetoric and understandability distinguished the tutors' responses from the instructors' comments.

And yet, the tutors in this survey did pass judgment, and at times highly racialized judgment. For example, many tutors' attitudes shifted markedly from supportive to accusatory when they were asked to evaluate AAL sentences. Some tutors did apply the same standard of intelligibility to the AAL sentences, and a few tutors drew a distinction between how they personally felt regarding AAL and how professors might judge it. One tutor wrote:

It's not a big problem for me, but I would try to make the student aware that this is a construction often used in African American Vernacular English

(AAVE), which because of the hegemonic nature of the University environment is often derided. In this situation, I feel that it's my responsibility to make the student aware of this issue while acknowledging my own discomfort with the way different varieties of language are marginalized.

Unfortunately, this individual's point of view was rare. Several tutors made comments that reflect a racialized standard, substantiating the claim that standard American English is the privileged language of middle-class European Americans. For example, regarding the sentence, "Those people be messing with me," tutors commented:

- "To me this is uneducated gheto [sic] talk even though quite a few of my friends speak this way I still have a problem with it."
- "You know better. Don't write a sentence like this."
- "It makes the author sound uneducated."
- "This type of mistake should never be accepted."
- "Ebonics is not written English."
- "It's just someone's voice coming out."

Similar derogatory statements were made against all five of the AAL sentences, including several references to the language sounding "childish."

The faculty comments were similarly negative, although many faculty members approved of AAL when used for effect (i.e., intentionally). Of course, this distinction between "intentional" and "unintentional" language use is also problematic, privileging written over verbal language and SAE over non-SAE, since "natural" use of AAL is still seen as "wrong." Furthermore, this distinction between "natural" and "intentional" must be based on a subjective and ultimately biased judgment. Here are some of the instructors' comments:

- "This one's just been drilled into me."
- "Proofreading issue or colloquial? Tough to tell. Effect. When used properly, I love it."
- "Depends if the student is quoting or misrepresenting our poor language."
- "As a cultural artifact and in slang, fine. In academic essays, tsk. tsk."
- "Ino!"

- “Depends on context.”
- “If the context is formal, & this isn’t a quotation, then I’d say ‘5.’”
- “Never.”
- “Sentence is completely unclear and vague.”
- “I rather like the mixing of syntax.”

The faculty members’ and the tutors’ comments parallel Bennenson-Mohamed’s (2002) findings in her interviews with professors: “For these professors, there are clear divisions between [Standard English (SE)] and [Black Dialect], and each of these languages is viewed as appropriate, but in different places. Faculty see SE as the only acceptable form in the classroom” (106). Or, as Smitherman (2006) notes, “In the minds of everyday people (and, unfortunately, even among some of my non-linguist academic colleagues—hello!), languages have high status, but dialects do not” (15).

However, when AAL markers were perceived as ELL markers, both tutors and faculty were forgiving. Indeed, excusing the ELL (ESL) writers is a recurring theme in both groups’ comments:

- “Grade depends on ESL student.” (faculty)
- “Unless working with ESL student.” (faculty)
- “Usually an ESL error, so I’m more understanding.” (faculty)
- “ESL student more acceptable than native speaker.” (faculty)
- “If the student is a native speaker, this could signal improper use of vernacular in formal writing, which can make the writer appear illiterate. . . . If found in an ESL writing sample, I would first ask if the writer is influenced by something heard or read. In either case, I’d watch for other vernacular constructions and try to persuade the writer to avoid them.” (tutor)
- “If native speaker, it may just be sloppiness—perhaps an editing error. If ESL writer, not so much of a problem—just needs to be informed of standard English usage.” (tutor)

The language used to discuss the ELL markers and the language used to discuss the AAL markers is profound—the survey participants expressed distaste and even disdain towards AAL, whereas they were understanding and compassionate towards ELL. What is the salient difference between

the two groups? ELLs might be racial minorities, after all, and AAL speakers/writers are not necessarily racial minorities. However, I think the issue is less about reality than perception, and I believe the participants presume AAL writers to be African Americans and the ELL writers to be foreign students studying in the United States. Even though it is possible that survey participants associated ELL with immigrants to the United States rather than international students, none of my survey participants level charges against the ELL sentences that align with Heinz Kloss’s (1971) four ideological arguments that contribute to monolingual ideology: (1) the tacit compact agreement, which is built on the assumption that individuals must forfeit their minority language in order to become real citizens; (2) the taken-and-given argument, which is built on the assumption that minority immigrants receive so much by moving to this new country, they must give up their language rights and conform to the new language; (3) the antihettoization argument, which suggests that adhering to a nonstandard language is a choice, one that leads to social and cultural lags; and (4) the national unity argument, which argues that minority languages will prove divisive. Instead, my survey participants showed no sign of being threatened by the ELL writers or of condescension, and as a result I believe they envisioned ELL as the language of international students who have no intention of becoming “real citizens.” For this reason, John Ogbu’s (1999) distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities is particularly useful.

VOLUNTARY VERSUS INVOLUNTARY MINORITIES

Ogbu’s (1999) hypothesis is that voluntary minorities (represented by the ELL sentences) and involuntary minorities (represented by the AAL sentences) perceive language differently. Ogbu explains, “Immigrants do not think that accommodating white American ways of talking threatens their language identity. They do not imagine that it requires them to give up their own languages or dialects to be able to learn the standard English” (154–55). In contrast, nonimmigrant minorities such as African Americans

seem to think that they are required to give up their own way of talking to be able to talk like white Americans. Accommodating White-American ways of talking seems to threaten their sense of dialect identity. Furthermore, they more or less hold white Americans responsible for eliminating the problems caused by the dialect difference, because white people created the problems by depriving them of their original languages. (155)

Although Ogbu uses the framework of voluntary versus involuntary minorities to explain African Americans' attitudes toward Edited American English as opposed to voluntary immigrants' view of Edited American English, these contrasting attitudes also influence how each group is, in turn, perceived. AAL becomes not merely nonstandard—it is a show of defiance, a favoring of the individual's speech community over the academy.

David O. Sears, Jack Citrin, Sharmaine V. Cheleden, and Colette van Laar (2001) label this phenomenon "ingroup attachment" and "outgroup antagonism." Ironically, the teachers' and the tutors' comments cited above reflect an "ingroup attachment" against the AAL "outgroup," an antagonism not shown the ELL writers. Of course, the use of AAL may be an issue of perceived rhetorical propriety in that, in the classroom rhetorical situation, professors may consider student use of AAL too informal. However, the derogatory comments suggest something more is involved, an anger that the AAL writers made no effort to conform; indeed, perhaps the writer intentionally did not conform. To protect the superiority of EAE, these defiant rejections of it may be declared "ignorant" rather than "alternative," resembling westerners' disgust with Tibetan tea. As Kathryn A. Woolard (1998) asserts, "Purist doctrines of linguistic correctness" usually shut down only those groups whom the dominant group sees as a threat (21).

On the other hand, the ELL writer is excused because second-language interference, not defiance, is deemed the cause. Furthermore, the ELL writers present no threat and no conflict. They are visitors, one might even say guests, who are perceived as bringing in money rather than taking away opportunities and money from U.S. citizens. Furthermore, international students of necessity have financial means and will return to their home country, eliminating the concern that an inability to use English perfectly will lead to the "ghettoization" that Kloss (1971) discusses. Finally, international students are outside the national system (they cannot vote; they are not citizens), so they are absolved of any civic responsibility to learn English in order to participate in the government. In other words, unlike African Americans, international students' presence in the United States is viewed as nonthreatening, even flattering. As a result, ELL writers are not judged as harshly as AAL writers.

CONCLUSION

Marilyn M. Cooper (1994) observes in "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers" that precisely because most tutors are students and have not yet been fully inculcated into the

academy, "the pressure on them to promulgate beliefs and practices that serve the purposes of the dominant group is less organized and less direct, although it is certainly not absent" (106). No, it is not. Although instructors' ratings averaged 3.7 whereas the tutors' ratings averaged 3.06, tutors' comments about AAL were significantly more caustic and indignant. Thus, despite all the gains in AAL scholarship and the efforts of AAL scholars to counter bias, some tutors still do not recognize that AAL is a valid variety of English. Sadly, that judgment against the language was transferred to the writers themselves, supporting Morgan's (2005) assertion that "in the United States, comments about the language of African Americans are consistently linked to comments about African Americans' cognitive ability and culture" (240). If the tutors had wished to express concern regarding the appropriateness of AAL in an academic setting, they would not have demonstrated such emotionality in their comments. I am reminded of westerners who didn't just respond to Tibetan tea as "different" but as "disgusting" in an effort to retain their own taxonomy. After all, when operating within their own system, westerners do not experience such culture shock.

In the same way, instructors and tutors uphold the standards of the university, including the demand that students use Edited American English, because this is the taxonomy they know. Too, when operating within that EAE system, they know the rules. It is for this very reason that ratings of fused sentences and fragments were consistently high; violations of sentence boundaries are understood as "serious" errors. We need a "standard," even if one does not actually exist, to avoid chaos. How would we judge what was "good" otherwise? In "English Only and U.S. College Composition," Bruce Horner and John Trimbur (2002) discuss this reification of Standard English, noting that

by "reification," we mean the treatment of something, such as spoken and written language, that is always in process, located in and subject to ongoing and varying material practice, as a fixed, idealized entity removed from the vagaries of time, place, and use. In this regard, reification is what makes things seem inevitable, given by the fact of their being instead of their history. (596)

My point is not that we should refrain from pointing out deviations from EAE, but that we should also historicize and contextualize EAE, acknowledging the validity of other Englishes such as AAL, to recognize that deviations are just that and should not be viewed as ignorance. As

Mina Shaughnessy (1977) pointed out in *Errors and Expectations*, rather than "sectioning off students' problems with writing," professors should develop "a readiness to look at these problems in a way that does not ignore the linguistic sophistication of the students nor yet underestimate the complexity of the task they face as they set about learning to write for college" (13).

I use the pronoun *we* here because my own experience with this project has been eye-opening, to say the least. My slippage in the creation of the survey reflects a struggle I continue to have with aligning my own writing and that of my students with a hegemonic, European American "standard" while simultaneously desiring the success that comes with becoming a part of that hegemony. But this "standard" should never be upheld at the expense of the individual. We all should be on guard against conflating writing and writer, and using the label of "error" too freely or hurtfully.

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