

4 Language subordination

Reading a textbook: roles and responsibilities

When you read a textbook, like you're doing right now, it's very clear that we, the authors, have certain obligations to make the text understandable and believable. For one thing, we should eschew obfuscatory locution wherever possible and, instead, use words that are clear and familiar. We try to keep sentences to a single point, to organize those sentences into sensible paragraphs by topic or theme, and to further organize those paragraphs into subsections, sections, and chapters that will enhance your ability to follow the argument we are making. And we never lose sight of the fact that we are, in fact, making an argument. This means we have to say only things that are true to the best of our knowledge and to provide evidence when claims are likely to seem outlandish to you, the reader.

Every step of what we have just described requires accommodation on our part: word selection, sentence design, and understanding which topics are likely to be unfamiliar so that they require more careful explanation and which topics are likely to seem outlandish or exciting so that they require a higher degree of evidence. Every step of this process requires us, the authors, to imagine you, the reader. We must consider what you are likely to know already and, much more importantly, what you do not yet know that seems obvious or second nature to us. These are the topics where we must be especially careful not to make any assumptions, to step back and to remember what it felt like to discover these things for the first time, and to try to give you the clearest, fairest presentation of the ideas our expertise and writing ability allow. If we do any of these steps poorly – if we guess incorrectly about who you are and what you believe, if we forget to lay out crucial ideas clearly, if we fail to provide evidence you find compelling – then our book becomes difficult to read, confusing, or, worst of all, unconvincing. If, on the other hand, we do our jobs well and you find yourself thinking “but what about X?” or “I don't think I agree with Y” just before we tackle the question you thought of or address the concern you're having, then we've created an artifact that will help us and other linguists teach you things we believe will be valuable to you and to society more generally.

So those are the obligations of the authors. But what are the obligations of the reader? What is your role in making this book readable, understandable, and thought provoking? Well, first you should be prepared to read critically. This is not the same style of reading you probably use to take a quiz on Buzzfeed or to read a book like *The Hunger Games* (but it is pretty close to the style of reading you might use to read a poem or a religious text). Although we do hope this book is at least somewhat enjoyable to read, you'll notice that “writing a story for you to enjoy” was not listed among what we feel to be our obligations in writing this book. This book presents ideas and challenges you to engage with them. This means you need to read actively.

You should be reading the words in this book for understanding, not merely recognition. It isn't enough to get to the end of a paragraph and make certain that you know what we said in case it is on a quiz or a test. You should get to the end of a paragraph and wonder why we've bothered to include that paragraph in a book that gives us only limited space to convey many difficult ideas. Why are we making a particular point? Why are we including a particular piece of evidence? Why might we be excluding other types of evidence? Reading this book properly does not mean coming away from it agreeing with everything we've said (not at all!). But reading this book properly does require you to try the ideas out, imagine what the world would be like if they were true, and try to imagine how your instinctive, habitual reactions to the ideas presented here might be shaped by the experiences, difficulties, and privileges you have had in life.

In other words, this book is an act of communication, and, like *any* act of communication, both the writer and the reader (or the speaker and the listener) have a role in achieving understanding. We've described ways in which we might fail, as authors, to hold up our end of the bargain. What are some ways that you might fail, as readers, to hold up your end? We can think of this mutual responsibility as a shared burden we are carrying together; it is *our* communicative burden. If you approach a book like this while distracted by your phone or while watching a movie in the background, then you have not upheld your part of the communicative burden, and the book is exceedingly unlikely to be readable, understandable, or thought provoking. Similarly, if you arrive at this book already certain that you know that our claims are wrong or not worth engaging with, then you have failed your end of the communicative burden.

So what? The thing about communicative burden is that there are consequences for both people involved when communication fails. In the case of a textbook, our peers may decide not to assign our textbook if we do a poor job of upholding our end of the communicative burden, and we will suffer public embarrassment and the loss of professional respect. Failure to uphold your end of the burden, for this or any other course material, can mean reduced understanding, a missed opportunity to think in new and expansive ways, lower grades, etc. These things are serious business. If a book is boring, or if you find a topic particularly challenging, you can adjust the amount of effort you put into reading it. In the same way that an author will adjust the amount of time, energy, and care devoted to writing about a particularly complicated idea, the reader can adjust the amount of time, attention, and care to take up more of the burden of understanding and, in doing so, help ensure communicative success. When communication fails in daily life, though, the consequences can be even more serious; failure of communication in a hospital, courtroom, squad car, or classroom can literally be a question of life or death.

Rejecting the gift: the individual's role in the communicative process

The most common rationalizations for discrimination against stigmatized accents and languages have to do with communication. “I've got nothing against [Taiwanese, Appalachians, Black people, female politicians],” the argument will go; “I just can't understand the way they talk.” It is not hard to find people who won't hesitate to publicly reject, denigrate, and mock varieties of English other than their own. People also have no problem silencing voices that aren't in the imagined “standard” variety. Rather than try to understand and interact with someone, standard language ideology provides the additional option of rejecting everything a person says because of the way they say it with the added benefit of placing blame for the communication failure on the other person.

Communication seems to be a simple thing: one person talks and another listens; then they change roles. But the social space between two speakers is rarely neutral. Think of the people you have talked to today. Each time you begin an exchange, a complex series of calculations begins: Do I need to be formal with this person? Do I owe her respect? Does he owe me deference? Will she take me seriously or reject me out of hand? What do I want from them, or them from me? Those calculations are more conscious in unusual encounters; for example, if you suddenly were introduced to the Queen of England, without preparation, would you be comfortable talking to her? For people and social groups that you interact with every day, the calculations are fast and typically well below the level of consciousness. When people are confronted with a new person they want to, or must, talk to, an individual makes a quick series of social evaluations based on many cues: hair, clothing, skin tone, body language, affect, gender, body type, and attractiveness along with language and accent. On the phone, of course, nearly the only cues one gets are from the talker's voice.

In any situation, a person can simply refuse to communicate. In an adversarial position, one may understand perfectly what their partners, parents, and friends say to us but still respond with "I cannot understand you." One can also say "You just don't understand" when in fact the issue is not comprehension but difference of perspective. Lindemann (2003) explored interactions between "standard" English speakers and non-native English-speaking Korean students to look for a connection between negative attitudes and poor comprehension. In all cases where the native English speaker held neutral or positive attitudes about the Korean-accented English speaker, communication was successful and described as successful by the participants. In cases where the native English speaker held negative views, though, one-third of communication attempts failed, and, regardless of success or failure, all participants rated their communication as unsuccessful. Simply believing that someone will be difficult to understand impedes communication and constrains a person's ability to notice when communication is successful. When a person rejects another's message in this way, they are refusing to accept responsibility in the communicative act, and the full burden of ensuring that communication is successful is put directly on the other. "I can't understand you" may mean, in reality: "You can't make me understand you."

Any communicative act is based on a principle of mutual responsibility, in which participants in a conversation collaborate and cooperate in the transfer of information. This involves complicated processes of repair, expansion, and replacement that are repeated until both speakers feel the information at hand has been conveyed. When a person is confronted with a voice they perceive as somehow "incorrect" or "improper," the first decision they must make, consciously or not, is whether to participate in the interaction at all. What happens again and again in cases of language-based discrimination is that members of the more dominant language group in a particular interaction feel perfectly empowered to reject their communicative responsibility and to demand that the subordinate person carry the majority of the burden in the communicative act. Conversely, when both speakers have approximately the same level of social status, the first response is not to reject the communicative burden but to take other factors into consideration and to work harder at achieving understanding, even when one's conversation partner is legitimately difficult to understand.

Based on personal histories, backgrounds, and social selves, which together comprise a set of filters through which an individual hears the people they talk to, that person will take a communicative stance. Most of the time, people will agree to carry their share of the burden. Sometimes, if they are especially positive about the configuration of social characteristics of the person or if the purposes of communication are especially important to us, one may even accept a disproportionate amount of the burden. Figure 4.1 presents the concept of

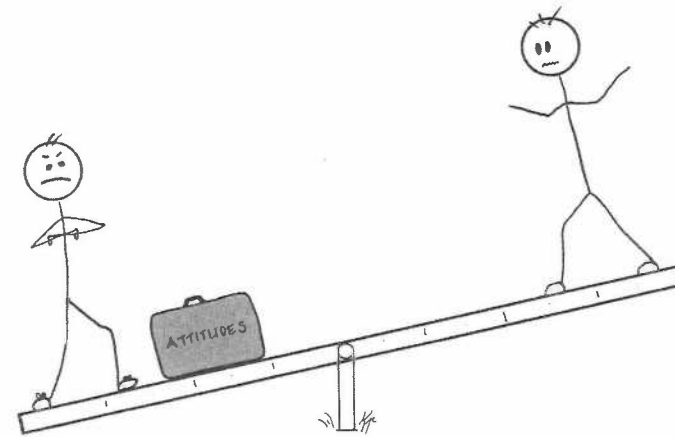


Figure 4.1 The balancing act of the communicative burden

communicative burden as a balance. Carrying around negative opinions of one's communication partner increases the amount of effort the partner must exert (if they can!) to restore balance to the conversation. Accepting or rejecting the communicative burden shifts the load one's conversation partner must bear.

Speakers of varieties recognized as "standard" typically don't even realize that they are refusing to do their part to produce effective communication. After all, they are the one who is speaking "correctly." The fact that speakers of other varieties must struggle to be heard typically goes unnoticed. This affords speakers of the "standard" the privilege of deciding whether to listen. This is an example of what Robin Queen (2019) calls "standard" *English privilege*, the set of social assumptions that afford additional opportunities and allowances that are unavailable to speakers of undervalued varieties of English. Those raised in communities where some variety of the "standard" was spoken have automatic social and economic advantages simply because of the language they were exposed to as a child.

Hesitance and uncertainty?

The truth is that employers, teachers, police officers, and really anyone who holds some kind of powerful position feels it is their right and their duty to hold those in lower positions to some kind of standard. The manager at McDonald's knows they must make sure their employees properly clean the ice cream machine. A sergeant must ensure that the soldiers beneath them adhere to the proper standards of behavior and dress. Language is no different. Speakers who believe themselves to be speakers of "standard" English feel it is their right and duty to ensure that others know and use "proper" grammar. But the judgment of another's grammar or accent has nothing to do with race, regional, or ethnic stereotypes occurs in the evaluation of female speech. Women (even those with "no regional accent," from the Midwest, with average or above average education, and so on) experience the power of language ideologies every time they open their mouths. Even in the cases where what comes out of their mouths is *exactly* like the speech of their male counterparts.

One example is the use of apologies. When men make apologies in the workplace, they typically go unnoticed, but an apology from a woman is likely to be seen as a sign of insecurity and a lack of assertiveness. Another important example is *creaky voice* (see Figure 4.2). This phenomenon, also called *laryngealization* or, derisively, “vocal fry,” is a type of vocal production in which the cartilages that control the vocal folds are held tightly so that part of each vocal fold can vibrate freely while another part is restricted in its movement. In Figure 4.2 one can literally see the result of these tight vocal folds as vertical white lines in the spectrogram on the right. These are instances of air escaping through the glottis without vibrating the vocal folds. Compare this with the spectrogram on the left showing a non-creaky pronunciation of “eye.” For the listener, the perception of the irregularity visible in the creaky spectrogram has been described as a rough popping or rattling sound. There is nothing dangerous, harmful, or even strange about this type of phonation. It is used stylistically in English, but the modal/creaky distinction also serves to distinguish different words from one another in languages all over the world like Mandarin Chinese, Hausa, Jalapa Mazatec, Montana Salish, and many others. It is a natural component of language. In American English, creaky voice is used approximately equally by men and women and can often be heard when someone is speaking in a low pitch, when they need to sound authoritative, and at the ends of phrases.

Despite being a natural part of the speech of both men and women, it is only women who receive scorn for it. The internet is filled with numerous attacks on only women for their use of this production type. The ironic fact is that creaky voice is very frequently used by young women to convey a kind of confidence or authority in what they are saying. Linguistic research on the feature (e.g., Pittam 1987; Henton & Bladon 1988; Gobl & Ni Chasaide 2003) has connected its use to masculinity, aggression, and authority. Podesva and Callier (2015) describe the association between masculinity and creaky voice as “iconic.” Women’s use, therefore, can be understood as an attempt to sound more authoritative (Dilley et al. 1996). For women, creaky voice offers the possibility of conveying assertiveness

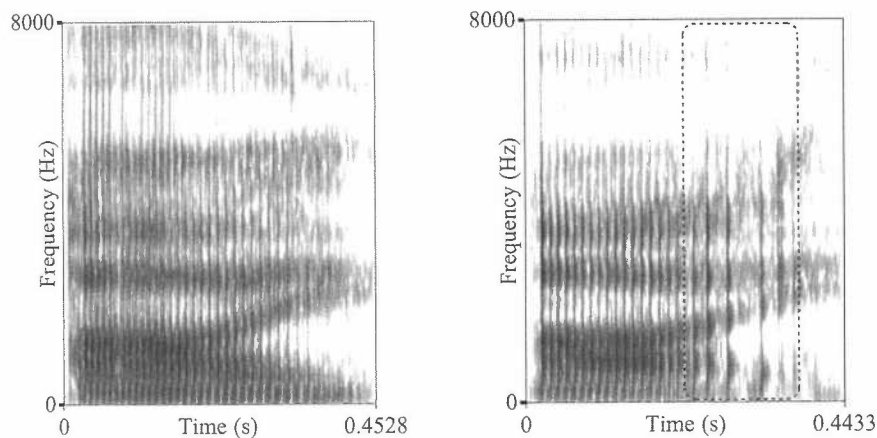


Figure 4.2 Spectrogram of the English word “eye” spoken in modal voicing (left) and creaky voicing (right)

and authority (the indexical meanings creaky voice carries when men use it) while avoiding more conventional ways of showing authority (ways that women know will be judged negatively).

Ultimately, such attempts at indexing authority tend to fail. Yuasa (2010: 316) found that while listeners’ ratings of American women’s creaky voice were basically positive in 2010, creak already sounded more “hesitant” and “informal” than non-creaky modal voice. During the early part of the 2010s, however, the positive associations appear to have faded. Lee (2016) asked listeners to rate both male and female speakers’ modal and creaky speech. She found that while listeners rated both male and female speakers as more “masculine” they were also heard to be more “hesitant” and less “feminine,” “educated,” “confident,” and “intelligent” when speaking in creaky voice, and these judgments were consistently harsher for the female speaker. The iconic masculinity that Podesva and Callier (2015) ascribe to creak simply does not appear to be compatible with contemporary American conceptualizations of female voice. The use of creaky voice among women, particularly young women, has become entangled with what Slobe (2018) has described as “pervasive anxieties surrounding girls’ linguistic and social practice” rising, in the 2010s, to the level of a “moral panic.”

Deficit vs. disorder

Creaky voice is one of the more recent phonation types to spark the ire of media and language mavens alike. They love to claim that using this vocal style is “bad for your voice” (even though no research confirms this). While there are certain pathological reasons that a speaker might need treatment (e.g., vocal-fold lesions, respiratory or neurological issues) with respect to this phonation type, speech pathologists (and their American professional organization, the American Speech and Hearing Association, or ASHA) recognize the difference between a speech deficit caused by a pathology and a speech difference such as the stylistic use of creaky phonation in American English. See Blum (2016) for a more intense discussion of this debate.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the issue of perceptions returns. The exact same linguistic feature is found in the speech of women and men but elicits wildly conflicting reactions. The same thing happens with other features, too: apologies, conversational interruptions, “uptalk,” overlaps, and the use of obscenities. These are all features shared by both women and men. When men use them, these features usually go unnoticed. However, when women use the same features, the features are not only noticed but judged to reflect some negative attribute that women supposedly possess. In such cases, the indexical meanings available to men (to convey authority, assertiveness, etc.) are not acknowledged when women employ the same indexical signs. This is the typical double bind of sexism – women are ignored unless they speak like men, but if they speak like men, they are perceived negatively (as a “bitch” and so on). Again, negative evaluations of language often have nothing to do with language itself and *everything* to do with the identities of speakers. When a *he* uses creaky voice, it is “professional” and “authoritative,” but when a *she* uses it, it suddenly suggests that she is “hesitant” or “untrustworthy.”

Just women?

Listen to the episode of the radio show *This American Life* linked on the website for this book both to hear the complaints listeners feel comfortable associating with creaky voice but also to see if you can hear how much more creaky voice the show's male host, Ira Glass, actually uses than any of the female reporters. As they discuss themselves, the show receives a seemingly constant stream of complaints about creaky-voiced women and no commentary at all about the men. These complaints about creaky-voiced women are relatively new, but the stream of complaints, unfortunately, is not. Before listeners inundated podcasts with complaints about women creaking, they used to inundate radio stations with complaints about women using rising intonation – so-called “uptalk.” In “uptalk,” or more formally, high rising terminal (HRT) intonation, speakers use a rising pitch curve in a semantically declarative sentence. As with creaky voice today, in the heyday of uptalk complaints, most of the complaints were directed toward young women.

This is the real power of myths and ideologies. The relationship between language ideologies and social power is most clear in cases like these, where the features themselves are constant. Power is the only difference. Unfortunately, members of groups who look down on or feel superior to young women latch onto creaky voice and other linguistic features as the target of their ire. Today they dismiss the young woman for her creaky voice, but they also used to do this for uptalk, and in the future they will do it for some new imagined linguistic slight that becomes indexically linked to young women. On this basis, they reject the communicative burden and place the work of understanding and being understood entirely on the shoulders of the female speaker.

Standard language ideology

Standard language ideology is used to justify the subordination of anything other than “standard” English. The argument is that children must be able to read, speak, and understand “standard” English so that they will be productive members of society. This position is belied by studies demonstrating that identical coursework will receive lower grades and harsher teacher commentary when the purported name attached to the work suggests that the child is not from the dominant group (Harari & McDavid 1973; Anderson-Clark et al. 2008; Kaiser et al. 2009). Because the actual structure of a uniform “standard” is left vague and unspecified, whether something is “correct” comes to be subjective. The indexical associations of the name at the top of a paper can predict which papers will have the worst grammar. Regardless of the grammar they ultimately use, minority children are typically assumed to speak “bad” or “broken” English. This “bad” English serves as the basis for discrimination, even though the motivation for deciding their English is “bad” is founded in racism. Claims that the pressure to assimilate to “standard” English is fundamentally about communication, positive, and in the best interest of the child are difficult to sustain considering this deep-seated bias.

One of the ways that systemic racism persists is by creating obstacles that make it more difficult for minorities to gain access to the institutions that might allow one to change the

system itself. Language becomes one of these obstacles. But overcoming the obstacle is tricky because the goal is a moving target; what “counts” as proper language remains vague and imprecise and regardless of how you say something, it will never be “heard” as being quite proper enough. Toni Morrison (1975) suggests that distractions such as “proper” English is perhaps the main ways in which racism persists:

The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

Saying that someone doesn't have language or can't learn grammar is no more reasonable than telling someone their head has the wrong shape or that they don't walk properly. The ubiquity of Standard Language Ideology results in a day-by-day, persistent devaluation of the social self, be it through résumé whitening that denies one's own name and unique experiences or by attempting to change one's voice to avoid being mocked. Because everyone has individual experiences of the language around them, each person recognizes a unique collection of potential indexical meanings. Language ideologies are therefore not always uniform across individuals or communities. Within any given society one can find assemblages of different language ideologies that reflect the diversity of experience and perspectives within that society. Such assemblages of language ideologies are a natural result of language being used across multiple contexts and communities. So, for example, the same linguistic variable may index different meanings for different participants in the same interaction. Your attempt to convey a polite and proper social persona may come across as stiff and boring to someone else. Awareness of the indexical meanings others probably link to you is the heart of DuBois's *double consciousness* (see Chapter 1). It is rarely a concern that native speakers of privileged varieties (i.e., close to the idealized “standard”) face.

Society has begun to recognize the value of having multiple perspectives provided by a diverse set of voices with distinct cultural backgrounds. However, when it comes to language, most will happily insist that people conform to a single language ideology: one in which the language of some people is treated as if it were inherently better than the language of others. A claim that white people are inherently superior to others is rightly recognized as an obviously racist statement that many would deem unacceptable in public discourse. Yet the claim that the language (many) white people speak is inherently superior to the language of others is ubiquitous and inescapable. *Standard Language Ideology*, or the belief that there is a single “correct” way to speak English, silences the voices of those who do not speak the “standard.” Of all the various language ideologies in American culture, Standard Language Ideology is not only the most powerful and the most widely accepted but also the one that causes the most damage. In this section, we outline the ways in which standard language ideology comes to enforce acts of language subordination.

A particular class of beliefs and expectations about language emerge from and create the notion that one particular variety of a spoken language is the “standard” variety. This ideology proposes that an idealized nation state has one perfect, homogenous language. That hypothetical, idealized language is how 1) d/Discourse is seized and 2) rationalizations for that seizure are constructed. It is also a fragile construct and one that needs constant and

vigilant protection. This constant protection is perhaps most visible in online responses such as YouTube comments, Twitter, and the default Reddit subreddits. In these places, any deviation from the fragile standard, no matter how small, will be latched onto and attacked, sometimes by hordes of users all saying exactly the same thing about “they’re vs. their vs. there” or “don’t vs. doesn’t.” Notice that these threads typically pay so little attention to the actual content of the material being commented on that you can freely move them to any other video, article, or tweet with no apparent loss of coherence. Such comments are not about communication or comprehension, as the “correct” forms do nothing to improve understanding. Compare, for example, spoken English where listeners have no problem understanding which *there/their/they’re* a speaker intends even though the orthographic differences are unmarked.

It might be argued that in American culture, which obliges everyone to participate in the educational system, everyone has access to public d/Discourse and the opportunity to learn “proper” English. But the educational system is the heart of the standardization process. Children who do not approximate the school’s idea of “standard” English will not find acceptance and validation in the schools and to suggest otherwise is, in a word, ludicrous. A child who tells their stories in stigmatized varieties of English is quickly corrected. They must assimilate or fall silent. These children are rarely given an explanation of why something they said was “wrong.” They are left to sort through the maze of red ink, hoping to understand exactly why the language they use is wrong. Sledd (1988) sees this as an institutionalized policy to formally initiate children into the linguistic prejudices (and hence, Standard Language Ideology) of the middle classes. The imposition of Standard Language Ideology may also lead minority children to feel that school is an unwelcoming environment, a place where every time you open your mouth you are silenced and told that you are wrong. The well-intended goal of teaching “standard” English results in teaching some children that they do not belong and that their very identity is unacceptable. Speakers of undervalued varieties of English learn early in life that their language is going to hold them back.

Fighting back!

In 2014, Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee announced a short course on “Southern Accent Reduction” to be offered to employees wanting to get rid of their Southern drawls. They had hired a professional accent reduction trainer to help employees “[f]eel confident in a meeting when you need to speak with a more neutral American accent, and be remembered for what you say and not how you say it.” While the origination of the request for such an offering came directly from one employee, the introduction of this new “opportunity” sparked outrage among many employees who objected to the course and felt offended that the company would even suggest it. The lab canceled the course.

Standard language ideology reproduces forms of everyday prejudice and makes them palatable because they are “about” language (rather than gender, race, age, etc.). Communication between speakers of different varieties of English may indeed be difficult or fail entirely. In many cases though, possibly even most cases, breakdown of communication is due not to a speaker’s accent or linguistic difficulty but to negative social evaluations of the speaker or

listener in question and a rejection, typically because of Standard Language Ideology, of one participant’s part of the communicative burden. In effect, this ideology makes it acceptable to ignore the voices of certain groups and to block them from public discourse. Standard Language Ideology does not ensure that communication in American society flows more easily. On the contrary, it is a tool used to silence minority voices and to maintain control over public discourse. As we have seen, racism is maintained through Discourses that encode stereotypes in ways that some people might find difficult to recognize.

Table 4.1 presents a model of the process of language subordination. The first stage of the model is the formation of social categorizations (discussed in Chapter 2). Racial categories differ from culture to culture, and the racial categories active in a society have no biological basis; they are created and maintained through language. In the next stage of the model, these social categories become entrenched through repeated use of *indexicality* linking signs (including, but not limited to, language) with a range of possible indexical meanings that may mark various aspects of an interaction (including, for example, the race of speakers). Over time these indexical meanings come to form sets that work together to create stereotypes characterizing various social groups.

This ideological relationship is like the definition of *indexicality* given earlier which produces links between signs and attributes of social structures. These signs do not have to be specific to language. For example, an indexical relationship could produce links connecting things like an inability to dance or love of mayonnaise with whiteness. This pattern serves as the basis for racial stereotyping and, in turn, patterns of discrimination.

Table 4.1 The processes of language subordination

Social categorization is constructed.

There are differences such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, and regional or national origin that exist and define who you are and what you are capable of. It is right to rise above your social categorization and conform to the standard.

Social groups are linked to ways of speaking.

Due to the linking of particular indexical meanings to ways of speaking, the way you talk is reflective of the social groups to which you belong.

Language is mystified.

You can never hope to comprehend the difficulties and complexities of your mother tongue without expert guidance.

Authority is claimed.

We are the experts. Talk like me/us. We know what we are doing because we have studied language, because we write well.

Misinformation is generated.

Your usage is inaccurate. The variant I prefer is superior on historical, aesthetic, or logical grounds.

Targeted languages are trivialized.

Look how cute, how homey, how funny.

Conformers are held up as positive examples.

See what you can accomplish if you only try, how far you can get if you see the light.

Non-conformers are vilified or marginalized.

See how willfully stupid, arrogant, unknowing, uninformed, and/or deviant these speakers are.

Explicit promises are made.

Employers will take you seriously; doors will open.

Threats are made.

No one important will take you seriously; doors will close.

As these indexical signs come to form a system of relationships that link various attributes with members of different social categories, one can think of ideologies as the matrix of indexical signs (and the relationships between them) that construct social reality and define perceptions of oneself and of others. As we saw in the discussion of categorizations, categories are built upon the attributes of a prototypical member. When this cognitive process is applied to racial categories, the imagined “prototypical” member becomes the type of person who fits all the (often racist) stereotypes associated with a category. These connections become solidified through discourses that present incessant instances of these indexical relationships.

Ultimately, people have typically seen various indexical relationships play out so many times that they may automatically come to mind when they interact with individuals from social groups that they may not be familiar with. Because these indexical relationships are so pervasive in Discourse, they may result in forms of discrimination that go unquestioned or even unrecognized. The repeated reproduction of these indexical relationships means that they become part of one’s habitual thought processes, even if unconsciously. Even if people are careful to avoid using particular racist words or ideas, the traces of racial ideologies may surface in other ways, such as through microaggressions or “dog whistles.” Indexical signs have *potential* meanings that may resonate in different ways across different contexts. It is this slippery nature of indexical possibility that allows forms of discrimination to persist despite laws enacted in the hope of bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

The process of language subordination requires that language be mystified as speakers are told that they don’t understand the structure of their language enough to know when they are wrong. The fact is that people do communicate with each other effectively in vernacular varieties, and they do so daily with no need for specialized or explicit knowledge of language. The claim that spoken language is so complex that mere native speakers can never sort things out for themselves is countered by the evidence of common experience, but the mystification message is so strong that many people believe they don’t speak their own language well.

This lack of knowledge means that one must rely on experts to let them know that they are wrong and that effective communication is only available to those who follow their guidance. Such experts are usually self-appointed. This knowledge of “right” and “wrong” is not based on any linguistic facts. Instead, the way that an “expert” typically speaks serves as the basis for their judgments of what is “(in)correct.” They claim authority because they are confident that their speech is superior to other varieties. As this authority is not based on actual knowledge of linguistics, it requires the sustained production of false information about language. Misinformation about language becomes so common that most people find it acceptable to have negative (prejudicial) evaluations of the ways of speaking that have been mislabeled as “bad” or “broken” English.

Once the purported inferiority of certain varieties of English is widely accepted, ostracizing speakers who use those varieties becomes socially acceptable. These undervalued varieties of English come to be trivialized. Speakers of these varieties deserve to be mocked and ridiculed for the way that they speak. Representations of speakers of different varieties typically treat speakers of more “standard” varieties as role models for others to follow – *He’s so articulate or Her English is so good*. Of course, such praise for those who command “standard” English is accompanied by the vilification of speakers who do not conform to ideologies of “proper” English. The denigration of non-native speakers and speakers of non-standard varieties allows others to drop their share of the communicative burden if their interlocutor speaks “bad” English.

People resist standard language ideology in a variety of ways. Art, literature, and music that celebrate undervalued Englishes are forms of resistance against the idea that only one “standard” language variety can be “beautiful” or “poetic.” But standard language ideology is so pervasive that there are contexts where resistance is not an option. Imagine trying to explain to a potential employer that your language is acceptable even though it is not “proper.” For speakers of undervalued Englishes, language subordination is inevitable. Speakers of stigmatized Englishes are promised large returns if they will just adopt “standard” English. They may be told that if they hope to have any success in life, they must first change the way they speak. In contrast, those who persist in their allegiance to undervalued varieties of English are threatened. They are told that without “better” English they will be cut off from the everyday privileges and rights of citizenship at every turn, regardless of inherent talent or intelligence. Of course, even if one does work to learn the “standard,” their speech may be perceived as unacceptable not because of its structure but because of the speaker’s assumed social categorization.

Confronting ideologies

Adherents of “standard” English typically have strong negative reactions to any attempt to cast a stigmatized variety in a positive or legitimate light. Dominant institutions lead the charge in cases like these, and the results are loud and shrill. More than 50 years of empirical work in sociolinguistics has established that language variation is neither an exotic feature of obscure dialects nor the result of “lazy” or “uneducated” speakers. Language variation is a core feature of how every living language works. This variation is central; it marks a language as robust and alive, and the variation itself carries meaning. Things like speech sounds, words, and sentence structures mark social attributes in meaningful ways. Whether people are aware of it, they use variation in language to construct themselves as social beings, to signal not only who they are but who they are not, who they want to be and who they do not want to be. Speakers choose among the available constructions, words, and sounds to create, in the minds of their listeners and for themselves, the identity they wish to convey. The choice may be to use a form or to strictly avoid a form that might send the wrong signal about the speaker. Both are meaningful choices. The choice itself can be conscious, although it is more likely to happen entirely below the level of conscious awareness. Either way, these choices group together into styles which are usually recognizable and interpretable to other speakers in the community. This process is a functional and necessary part of the way people live and interact. It is an essential feature of spoken language and of meaning more generally – not an optional one.

When a person is asked to reject their own language, they are being asked to drop allegiances to the people and places that define them as an individual. One doesn’t – and cannot – ask a person to change the color of their skin, their religion, or their physical abilities. It is controversial when laws require people to use a bathroom that does not match their gender, but people routinely demand that others suppress or deny their native accent: the most effective way humans have of situating themselves socially in the world. Consider these possible utterances and ask yourself what each one is really communicating:

1. I don’t care about the color of your skin but go talk like that someplace where it won’t insult my ears.
2. You were a successful engineer in Ukraine, sure, but why can’t you speak real English?
3. If you just didn’t sound so compone, people would take you seriously.

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- 4. Please take this woman off the radio, it sounds like she’s gargling gravel when she talks.
- 5. You’re the best salesperson we’ve got, but do you have to sound so gay?

What can utterances like these really tell us about the ideologies of the person speaking them? Take the first one, for example. Regardless of your own race and social background, chances are you have heard or even said something like this at some point. Given the history and culture of the United States, can the first part of this utterance really be true? Particularly when followed by the second half of the utterance, revealing negative language ideologies, but also just as a general statement. Is it likely that someone who feels comfortable saying such things actually “don’t care about the color of your skin”?

I’m not racist, but . . .

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) has studied the discourse associated with *color-blind racism*, or uses of language that attempt to deny the potentially racist indexical associations they convey. Phrases like *I’m not racist, but . . .* attempt to preempt the interpretation of one’s words as indicating that one is, indeed, racist. This particular example has become so common that it is readily recognized as insincere. One user on urbandictionary.com defines *I’m not racist, but* as “Something an idiot says just before making a comment that proves the idiot is, in fact, a racist.” Even so, there are many people who claim to “not see color.” Even if it could be true, proclaiming that one is entirely “color-blind” does nothing to reduce or prevent racism. It simply claims to ignore the racist indexical meanings that occur throughout public discourse, which is no better than denying racism as a social problem.

When you look closely at language-focused discrimination like the list of examples earlier, you will, of course, recognize that it is not language per se that is the target of complaint; instead, it is the speaker’s statements and beliefs about *language* that reflect their implicit and explicit beliefs, their ideologies, about *people* and the culture they are a part of. These sets of ideologies not only shape the way speakers and listeners talk to or about one another but may also influence the success or failure of any attempt to communicate.

None of this is to say that there are no rules to language use or that people are free to communicate with whatever forms or usages strike their fancy in the moment. Rather, choice among linguistic variants is always constrained by who the speaker is, how they hope others see them, and the context within which they are communicating. This is not just true of “standard” English; this is true of all language varieties. At the end of the previous paragraph that contains the list of utterances, we used *don’t* in a context where “standard” English would require *doesn’t*. Did you notice it? If you didn’t notice it, why do you think that is? If you did notice it, how did it make you feel? We were careful to do this in a way that was clearly and unavoidably an error (incorporating quoted material in a way that violates the syntax of the sentence). Throwing in a single form that is incongruent with established expectations is a stylistic choice one might make, in speaking or writing, but it is always meaningful. If the use of *don’t* above upset you, you might should ask yourself how come do you care so much what sort of English people use if you can understand what they mean?

Dominant institutions promote the notion of an overarching, homogenous standard language based primarily on (the imagined speech of) white, upper middle-class, straight, cis-gender males and derived from an imagined middle-America devoid of people of color, immigrants, women, or LGBTQ+ people. Whether the issues at hand are large-scale and sociopolitical in nature or more subtle, whether the approach is coercion or consent, there are two sides to this process: first, devaluation of all that is not (or does not seek to be) politically, culturally, or socially marked as belonging to the privileged class, and second, validation of the social (and linguistic) values of the dominant institutions.

The process of linguistic assimilation to an abstracted standard is portrayed as natural, necessary, and even positive for the greater social good. In addition to its power to deny access and create obstacles for specific groups of speakers, Standard Language Ideology licenses the practice of ignoring or rejecting speakers who use a stigmatized language variety. Listeners may “shut down” and refuse to interact with someone based on that person’s variety of English. It provides speakers of the “standard” with the privilege of deciding when they want to interact with people different from themselves.

What we have attempted to demonstrate is that suppression of socially meaningful linguistic variation – everything from seemingly benign commentary to physical violence – in favor of a mythical standard variety is unavoidably about suppressing the kinds of people who (are presumed to) speak in ways that are widely denigrated. Precisely *because* choice of linguistic variants is constrained by who we are, the life we have experienced, and the context within which we are communicating, subordinating particular linguistic variants, barring them from use in everyday contexts, is using language ideology to subordinate people.

Discussion questions

- 1. As we’ll continue to see in later chapters, people are pretty good at discerning certain information about other speakers, even given very little linguistic information to go on. Is it problematic in and of itself to be able to know someone’s race, ethnicity, etc. from hearing them talk? When does being able to notice such information become discriminatory?
- 2. We have seen several distinct slogans created by civil rights activists: “Black Lives Matter,” “I AM a man,” “A man was lynched yesterday,” “Say their names,” etc. What aspects of dominant racial discourse do these slogans challenge? What sort of patterns within discourse structural racism do they attempt to undermine?
- 3. Children come to school speaking whatever language varieties they hear at home and in their communities. This is true for all language varieties: Italian, Japanese, Cherokee, American Sign Language, Appalachian English, Jewish American English, etc. In what ways could we consider undervalued Englishes spoken at school as similar to languages other than English spoken in American schools? In what ways are these scenarios different? Why?
- 4. When interacting with someone for the first time, how do you know what term of address to use? Should you use titles like Mrs., Dr., or Rev.? Should you use their first name? Should you use a nickname or a shortened version of their name? What would you do if someone used the “wrong” address form for you? What would you do if someone corrected your choice of address term?
- 5. Most people who complain about creaky voice and uptalk in the voices of female broadcasters will vehemently disagree with the idea that they are actually complaining about

the gender of the speaker rather than the linguistic facts of the situation. From the *This American Life* story linked on the website for this book, what evidence can you find to support or refute this claim? While thinking about uptalk, notice that most questions in English *do not*, in fact, rise at the end. Compare “When was George Washington president?” or “Who is buried in Grant’s tomb?” to “Do you understand what I’m saying?” or “Can you hear me?”

5 Place-based variation in the American context

The social meaning of place

There is a common belief that regional differences in American English are eroding, and that, as time passes, people will all sound more and more alike. Broadcast, print, and social media outlets are believed to be the power that fuels this march toward homogeneity, and remarks on this topic show up in letters to the editor, on discussion forums, in human interest news stories, and on blogs. Though many linguists would call such a belief one of the more pervasive of the language myths (e.g., Chambers & Trudgill 1998), the full impact of such media on language is understudied in sociolinguistics (e.g., Stuart-Smith 2007; see Chapter 12 for more on language and media).

It is unclear who originated the idea that media destroys regional variation, but one can say with certainty that regional varieties of English are *not* becoming more alike over time, despite mass communication. It seems so intuitive that media would erode regional differences, but intuition is a terrible way to do science. Hard evidence makes it clear that just the opposite is true. Regional varieties of American English are changing, and many of the changes in progress are causing differences to intensify rather than diminish. Of course, regional dialects show internal variation with individual speakers adopting or rejecting innovations to convey a unique social persona. Regional dialects also interact with other types of variation in different ways. As with much social science research, discussions of regional variation have a history of being based on a limited population of (usually white) speakers. As you read through these descriptions of regional varieties, remember that regional dialects contain internal variation that may index social factors beyond region. Because of interactions between varieties and distinct histories, patterns of regional variation may differ for speakers of different genders, classes, or ethnicities. For example, many features categorized as “Southern” are maintained by African Americans outside of the South.

NORMs

Early work in American regional dialects sought out what they called NORMs as research participants – **n**ative (to the region), **o**ld, **r**ural **m**en – because they were thought to have the speech variety that was the most conservative (which is to suggest “unchanging” and therefore close to the “real” dialect of the area). The choice of name, therefore, is not coincidental; these early researchers saw the speech of NORMs as the “norm” against which all other varieties (for example, those of newcomers, young