

What is linguistic justice?

While many linguists and composition scholars agree there is no such thing as “standard English,” standard English continues to be the *sin qua non* taught in academic classrooms. Moving away from standard English and toward linguistic justice creates uncertainty for teachers responding to student writing.

Standard English is defined as language usage that is deemed proper and correct. Standard English reinforces the language usage of white, male, upper middle-class speakers (Baker-Bell, 100). Conversely, linguistic justice acknowledges that English has never been “uniform” and attempts to standardize language are intended to eliminate cultural differences among speakers and writers. Dr. April Baker-Bell defines linguistic justice as “an antiracist approach to language and literacy education” (7). She argues that “The belief that there is a homogenous, standard, one-size-fits-all language is a myth that normalizes white ways of speaking English and is used to justify linguistic discrimination on the basis of race” (Baker-Bell, 99).

The move toward linguistic justice is not a recent development. In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English released a statement entitled [“Students’ Right to Their Own Language.”](#) NCTE published the [“Statement on Second Language Writing and Multilingual Writers”](#) in 2001. Most recently, in 2020 NCTE released [“This Ain’t Another Statement: This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice.”](#) The ECU Writing Center staff also made [its own call for linguistic justice](#) in 2021.

What do students need to know about linguistic justice?

There’s nothing wrong with how they write or speak.

When we critique individuals for using their native language and dialects, we are also critiquing the individual. There is a deep connection between language and identity. Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (39).

There are rhetorical choices they can make in writing.

Different writing contexts require writers to make different language choices. Writers should be encouraged to respond to the rhetorical situation: what’s the purpose for this writing? What’s the audiences’ expectations? Because language is fluid and flexible, we can adapt our writing to best fit different situations. As linguist Rosina Lippi-Green writes, “Language is incredibly flexible and responsive; we make or borrow what we do not have. In this flexibility and ability to change and adapt when necessity or will arises, all languages—all varieties of any given language—are equal” (9).



How can you promote linguistic justice in your classroom?

Remember that preoccupation with standard English is a gatekeeping mechanism.

Focusing on grammatical “correctness” is an attempt to exclude minoritized students from academic spaces. Dr. Asao Inoue states: “The simple answer to the question is: no, English grammar is not racist, but the systems in education and civic society that use a particular version of English grammar against people who don't use that grammar is racist” (para. 16).

Rather than grade or respond to grammatical concerns, [pay attention to other rhetorical concerns such as idea development](#). Craft a rubric that attends to multiple rhetorical features. Think of students’ language differences as opportunities for making meaning, not obstacles to be overcome. Consider the choices students make in their writing as “strategic and creative choice, rather than a barrier or error” (“Introduction,” para. 2).

Educate yourselves on the histories of languages and dialects your students speak.

Different varieties of English have their own complex grammar systems; they’re just not grammar systems recognized by the academy. For example, Chi Luu traces the evolution of Black English, pointing out that its use of double negatives is often looked down upon, even though it has a long history in English literature and shows up in other languages: “Like many language myths that are still fervently repeated, it’s only since the eighteenth century that we became loath to use double negatives in this way (no thanks to the grammarian Robert Lowth) and to consider it wrong and illogical. Before then, speakers were using double negatives illogically daily (and probably twice on Sundays), from Chaucer to Shakespeare and many others” (para. 2).

Share with your students the contributions of different languages and dialects.

James Baldwin wrote about Black English: “Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound” (para. 5).

Discussion questions

What is your connection between language and identity? What were your first experiences with learning to read and write? How did they shape you?

How do you assess writing? How do you weigh grammar in your rubrics?

How do you create more space for speakers of different languages and dialects in your rubric?



Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

Baker-Bell, April. *Linguistic Justice*. Routledge, 2020.

Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" *The New York Times Archive*, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-english.html?source=post_page. Accessed September 22, 2022.

"Introduction to Translingual Writing." *OWL at Purdue*, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/teacher_and_tutor_resources/translingual_writing/index.html. Accessed September 22, 2022.

Inoue, Asao. "Is Grammar Racist? A Response." *Asao B. Inoue's Infrequent Words*, 27 Feb. 2017, <http://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/2017/02/is-grammar-racist-response.html>. Accessed September 22, 2022.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2012.

Luu, Chi. "Black English Matters." *J STOR Daily*, 12 Feb. 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/black-english-matters/>. Accessed September 22, 2022.

