Affirming Language Variation in a Standard English Classroom

Gayle Fallon

In Douglass Parker's English translation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the character Lampito, an uneducated Spartan, speaks to educated Athenians in what Parker describes as "a somewhat debased American mountain dialect," so the audience understands that Athenians viewed Spartans as "formidably old-fashioned bumpkins, imperfectly civilized, possessed of a determined indifference to more modern value systems" (Parker 115n21). Here are some of Lampito's lines: [SLIDE 2]

"Shuckins, whut fer you tweedlin' me up so? I feel like a heifer come fair-time" (22).

"She hails from over by Korinth, but her kinfolk's quality—mighty big back there" (22).

"Git on with the give-out. I'm hankerin' to hear" (23).

Parker's choice to use a vague "mountain dialect" does chime well with Aristophanes' use of dialect to connote Athenians' intellectual superiority. When I read *Lysistrata* for the first time, however, I felt embarrassed. Lampito's translated dialect contains many features of Appalachian English, a variant of which is the native dialect of my small hometown in rural Ohio. Seeing features of my dialect used to represent the uneducated "[bumpkin]" in a Greek play—a text that few people read outside of a university setting—conjures up the specter of linguistic insecurity familiar to us academics who grew up surrounded by a dialect that doesn't possess the same social prestige as Standard American English. Lampito's lines seem to me like a bizarre insult hurled from an elitist stage voice still ringing after 2000 years. These lines imply that I do not, like Lampito, belong in educated Athens.

I imagine many of my freshmen and sophomore students at Rocky feel similarly uncomfortable when they see memes such as this one [SLIDE 3], or when a viral TikTok shows

a dialect coach teaching the Minnesota Vikings to say "melk" instead of "milk" [SLIDE 4]. Our cultural attitude towards dialects other than Standard American English—the preferred mode of communication in American college settings—deeply affects students as they learn to speak and write in college classrooms. This is evidenced by the enormous influence higher education plays in the standardization of academic conversation: students quickly adopt SAE in the college classroom because, as linguist Miriam Meyerhoff writes, it "function[s] as a gatekeeping norm, establishing who and who will not be able to exercise authority or power" (Meyerhoff 15-16). [SLIDE 5] I've learned through discussions in my own classes that students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Cajun English, North-Central American English, Canadian dialects, varieties of Southern U. S. English, Native American languages, and those who speak English as a second language—all of which I've encountered here at our small but diverse school—mentally agonize over the grammar of questions before they ask them. Students flatten accents and shorten diphthongs; they carefully avoid g-dropping; they front or swallow their vowels.

This standardization is not benign—for students of color, especially, the implied need to adopt SAE is what education expert Joyce King calls "an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity…by accepting the existing order of things as given…[it] tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges" (135). Our cultural preoccupation with SAE can silence many students altogether, especially in discussion-based classrooms. Nevertheless, our college expects students to produce work written in SAE; I am admittedly a part of the system that perpetuates these "dominant White norms and privileges." In this presentation, I would like to describe one lesson I use to foster an inclusive environment for classroom discussion in SAE-focused Composition courses. I'll start with a brief discussion of why affirmation of dialect variation is vital in our

classrooms, then I'll describe practical multimodal methods for affirming dialect variation in the first week of a semester, and I'll conclude with some thoughts on how these methods might be enhanced in the future.

In a 2016 SAMLA presentation, Jessica Jorgenson Borchert suggested starting each semester in a college Composition classroom with a discussion about dialect variation. Simply recognizing and affirming dialect variation is, according to Borchert, a way to create a more communal, empathetic space for a diverse student body; it also allows an instructor to segue neatly into honest conversations about both beneficial and harmful aspects of SAE requirements in academia. [SLIDE 6]

Borchert's stress on linguistic inclusion directly challenges traditional "eradication theory," which has been employed in all levels of American schooling for several decades. Eradication theory is based on Basil Berstein's 1960s deficit model, which assumes lower-class families have "deficient" speech. Berstein promotes language education as a remedy for linguistic deficiencies; as linguists Ralph Fasold and Roger Shuy explain, "The aim of English education, [acc. to eradication theory], is to rid oneself of the stigma of those features by simply eradicating [unwanted linguistic] features" (xi). Obviously, this theory devalues non-Standard dialects, not only in the negative definition of non-Standard features as those which signal a *lack* of language itself, but in its breezy implication that speakers of non-Standard dialects should *want* to eradicate speech devalued by the social elite. [SLIDE 7]

Desiree de Chachula, referencing a line from Shakespeare's *Richard II*, calls a student's home dialect and language her "native breath" (84). She argues that native breath is a student's "natural and most expressive language," the tongue in which "voice and identity are grounded" (de Chachula 85). When instructors do not actively recognize the link between a student's native

breath and her identity, it is easy for that student to conclude that *she* is unwelcome in the academy. Conversely, when instructors find ways to celebrate linguistic variation, they challenge the classroom power dynamics that normally limit student agency. With this in mind, I now carve out one day early in the semester for an explicit discussion concerning the relationship between language and power.

The goal for this day is not to force every student in my class to contribute to class discussion, as an intense focus on dialect early in the semester can seem intimidating to those students who speak non-Standard dialects at home. Instead, I use this day to confront the elitism that creates linguistic insecurities and to establish inclusive parameters for class discussion going forward. The class period is split into four components that work together as a multimodal package: 1) a brief moment for student writing, 2) a short lecture, 3) audio and video clips, and 4) a discussion focused on the connotations evoked by the audio and video clips. (As a brief aside: I'm now starting to show the video clips in higher-level classes instead of my Composition classes—for reasons I would be happy to chat about later—but this is my original lesson plan.)

So first, I ask each student to write—individually and privately—the *worst* sentence he or she could possibly ever write in an English class. Students keep their respective sentences on their desks throughout the class period.

During the subsequent lecture, I make sure to do the following: [SLIDE 8]

- I present a working definition of dialect as the systematic usage of a language variety by a group of people. By *systematic*, I mean that each dialect is a fully functioning communication system, complete with its own predictable grammatical forms, sound patterns, and unique vocabulary. Anything that's acceptable in a dialect of English cannot be "incorrect" English, because it's a part of a rule-bound system. I summarize William

Labov's findings in his famous 1972 study of AAVE, in which Labov outlines the logic and structure of AAVE in order to decry the ignorance of eradication theory ("The Logic of Nonstandard English," chapter in *Language in the Inner City*).

- I stress that most definitions of dialect are controversial, and even linguists have a difficult time describing the difference between a dialect and a language. A student should consider herself an expert on what her home speech patterns are, even if she cannot articulate the rules for those patterns. [SLIDE 9]
- I quote linguists who, like Anne Hudley and Christine Mallinson, note that "no two [textbooks] treat questions of language standards in the same way" because "the search for a single standard grammar has been historically elusive" (14). In other words, no one actually *speaks* Standard American English. On formal occasions, we try to imitate SAE in speech, but even the most well-educated, stuffy English speaker probably speaks only an approximation of SAE behind closed doors.
- I invite students to speak whatever dialects they feel most comfortable speaking while in the classroom and to stop mentally checking their grammar every time they ask a question or contribute to class discussion. I also give them permission to use slang terms in class. [SLIDE 10]

If we have time, we view the eight-minute documentary "Tammy's Story," an episode of the *People Like Us: Social Class in America* series produced by the Center for New American Media. The documentary follows an Appalachian family's struggle to make ends meet in a small town where the economy has essentially collapsed. I choose to focus on Appalachian speech here not only because I'm familiar with it, but because it's a caricatured, denigrated regional variety that my students are unlikely to speak. Because they are unaccustomed to Appalachian English,

they are more willing to offer honest, critical reactions to the video in the following discussion. The video thus serves as a springboard into a discussion of what, exactly, makes us uncomfortable or critical when we hear regional dialects. [SLIDE 11]

When I ask for knee-jerk reactions after watching the video, students say that they feel "sorry" for the interviewees in the documentary, but the discussion then moves into a delicate examination of student speech variants that are also associated with a lack of education and poverty. I let the students guide this part of the class, so the particulars of the discussion change with each new semester, but inevitably some of my students will cite personal experiences—many from, unfortunately, high school English classrooms—when they were publicly embarrassed for their speech. What's surprising to the majority of my students is that they all, no matter their race or social class, feel that they've been shamed at some point by the school system for not speaking "formally enough" in the classroom. Though students usually agree that they *want* to learn to both speak and write in SAE, they unanimously feel upset when recalling on-the-spot grammar critiques. Though they had good intentions, their English teachers pointed out transgressions instead of highlighting differences.

Before class ends, we return to the sentences students wrote at the beginning of class. I don't require students to share these sentences with one another because these words frequently carry remnants of the shame they have felt in previous English classes. These sentences belie present linguistic insecurities, "mistakes" that inspire a sort of linguistic self-checking repeatedly throughout the day. However, when we reexamine these sentences at the end of class, students often see dialectal features instead of mistakes. For example, one student at one of my previous institutions told me she had used several markers of Cajun English—she had even spelled words phonetically, trying to imitate the phonemes that she had learned were inappropriate for

classroom speech. In other students' sentences, "to be" verbs are missing, diphthongs stretch across the room, double negatives negate nothing. Through more intense conversation, we separate the many dialect markers from the few nonsensical constructions in our "bad" sentences.

To conclude the discussion, I mention that the interviewees in the "Tammy's Story" video are people from my hometown. The class always goes still at this point, which is a little awkward, but I want them to know that affirmation of language variation is personal to their instructor, and that I mean what I say when I welcome all dialects in my Composition classroom.

Since I've implemented this lesson plan, I've witnessed an increase in the number of students who are willing to contribute to class discussion and an increase in the number of students *visiting my office hours* (not just an increase in emails!) to ask for help with work. It's difficult to identify one class session as the cause of these phenomena; however, I can't deny that students seem more engaged since I've started emphasizing dialect at the start of the semester.

In the future, I would like to find ways to honor both dialect variation *and multilingualism* in students' written work. Nadia Behizadeh argues that this is possible through the creation of large-scale writing portfolios that *can* include at least one multidialectal/multilingual piece, accompanied by a detailed SAE reflection explaining the piece's purpose (Behizadeh 132). Instructors can, Behizadeh reasons, score the reflection to satisfy an institution's SAE requirements. I am eager to give my students this option, as doing so might be another way to open the gates of academia just a bit wider. [SLIDE 12]

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