

## “I’m Just Following the Policy”: The Last Line of Defense for “Standard English”

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At a professional development forum on teaching writing, a panel presenter reminded the attendees that Black English is a linguistic system in its own right and that, as Vershawn Ashanti Young argues, code switching is a form of linguistic segregation (“Nah, We Straight”). The presenter concluded, “saying that Black English is not appropriate for academic situations is saying essentially that African American thought and identities do not belong in academic settings” (Muhammad). Part of an ongoing series, this talk on Black English and code meshing was included on a panel with two additional presentations about language, culture, and writing pedagogy. The presentation drew a small crowd of maybe 15 writing teachers representing five or six institutions of higher education in our region.

As the presentation ended and the questions began, a tall man with straight, brown hair whom I didn’t know raised his hand and politely addressed the presenter. “Well, first I’d like to say thank you for that presentation. But one of the things that concerns me about what you’ve mentioned is preparing our students for the world after college. If we don’t ask our students to write in Standard English, how will they be able to do it when they are expected to do it in the workplace?”

The panelist replied that Black English is a language with regular rules and offered some examples of those rules in context. The man seemed to understand this answer but not accept it as a reason not to teach “Standard English.” He continued to push; his questions were framed with further justifications for expecting White language practices in first-year writing: “I want students to value their own language, but where should we draw the line?”; “How do we incorporate code meshing into our grading rubrics and reconcile it with grading grammar?” until his justifications had all been exhausted by kind and quiet replies from the panel that pointed out the differences between grammatical error and the systematic nature of language. As his litany came to a close, he looked around the audience of mostly white women spread sparsely around the large classroom where the presentation was being held, until he saw me—another white man, one of the very few white men in the room. And once he had seen me, he started talking to me, solely to me, seemingly, ignoring all of the other faces in the crowd and the panel who was presenting. In that moment, he landed on his final excuse, the one last nuclear option.

“Well, unfortunately, I’m not able to offer my students the option of writing using their own dialect. Our program has a policy that requires writing in Standard English.” He looked at me, expecting my support, as if surely I understood, as if I was a sympathetic ear. Policy. The rules. The law. The last line of defense in unconsciously racist thinking, a way to shift the blame for what’s right onto a document and thus deflect anger and judgment onto that supposedly immaterial arbiter of success. An unconscious justification through misdirection, as if one was saying, “look, it’s not my fault. I’m just following the rules.”

As he finished and sat looking expectantly at me to answer, I repeated back what I’d heard. “It sounds like there is a policy at your school that requires you to grade students on their use of Standard English. Is that right?”

“Yes,” he replied and perked up slightly.

“Well,” I said, “it sounds like you need to change the policy.”

He let out a small plosive sigh and sank back into his seat, his body language saying, “You don’t get it.”

This moment reminds me of the persistence of anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell). Upon reflection, it is clear that this evocation of the policy was just one more excuse for maintaining the primacy of white language practices in academic spaces. Such moments demonstrate the value of setting clear local policies tied to disciplinary scholarship and informed by texts like “Students’ Rights to their Own Language” and “This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” Doing so makes programmatic expectations clear to faculty and ensures that anti-Black linguistic policies don’t serve as a last line of defense for white linguistic practices in the academy.

But this vignette demonstrates another important point for WPAs to consider. This is hard, strategic, long-term work, as the long history of scholarship and policy-making calling for linguistic justice demonstrates. A well-crafted policy, a single professional development presentation or workshop isn’t enough to bring about systemic change. The demands laid out in “This Ain’t Another Policy Statement!” make clear that, as a WPA, I must continually ask myself how I can meet the demand to “do much better in [my] own self-work that must challenge the multiple institutional structures of anti-Black racism [I] have used to shape language politics.” And so ultimately, while this is a story about language policies, it is also a story about myself, a reflection about how I might do better in similar moments in the future to enact systemic change. It’s a reminder that I need to be self-reflexive in my work and be mindful of the ways that inaction and things left unspoken aid racism. Because ultimately, this particular attempt was not

successful. Curious to see whether things had changed since this discussion, I checked the institution's website. The policy still exists.

#### WORKS CITED

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