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In doctorate studies as “adult learner” (the university’s euphemism for students seeking a degree later in life—I was fifty), I was preparing to teach English and German at college level when a course in language arts brought a new understanding of our use of language. First off, the professor taught us to consider all languages, all dialects, and all creoles but variants equal in value to Standard American English or the Queen’s English. The “standards” themselves are variants. The terms recently arrived with GPS and Internet use, which evolved along with its own grammar rules, are cases in point.

Gullah, an English-based creole that originated in West Africa and is spoken by African Americans in the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia, evolved similarly. Yiddish, originally a German dialect with words from Hebrew and Russian, is spoken today mainly in the U.S. and Russia. All variants, we learned, have their own complex grammar and syntax—yes, even the double negative of “She ain’t got no reason to go there” has its grammatical rule.

Some variants, we were made aware, are less valued, a “language bias” we should avoid, since we’ll encounter students whose first language is not English, or students who speak English with a dialect they may have acquired in childhood and find difficult to relinquish. Most students who have reached college level, we were advised, will have become proficient at code-switching: they’ll speak the accustomed lingo with family and friends and the “acceptable” version at school and in the workforce.

Needless to say, the “acceptable” jargon can be disconcertingly alienating; still, everyone uses code-switching to some degree. We hardly use the same lingo in church or in a court as we do playing cards with buddies or siblings.

I was born and raised in Germany and between the ages of ten and fourteen I was lucky to study British English for four years and Parisian French for two; hence, my accent is less pronounced than my brother Karl’s. Karl arrived at eighteen with hardly any English and began his American life working in a German bakery in New York. Meanwhile in California my husband, a missile engineer wanting to become a lawyer, participated in a local Toastmasters club. From him I learned to pay close attention to sentence structure and enunciation.

Darold had an aversion to reading, often claiming his eyes were tired after a day’s work designing missile components. Since I loved to read, I gladly read his law books aloud when our babies slept.

Back then, nothing delighted me more than someone saying to me, “Do I detect a Scottish accent?” It reminded me of the time I returned to Germany after working as an au pair for a year in France and friends remarking that I now spoke German with a French inflection. Did I devalue my native language?

During my first few years in California I felt I ought to have my hand in front of my mouth. At the time—I arrived in 1963—the memories of Nazi atrocities were still fresh in people’s minds and I imagined—erroneously, I now think—that my interlocutors would hold them against me.

Feeling ashamed of one’s accent or dialect makes the speaker reluctant to open up. This leaves an unfortunate impression of secretiveness and unwillingness to disclose oneself, which is apt to alienate both the speaker and his or her listener.

I completed my doctorate in 2000 and became a lecturer at an Historically Black university in Tennessee. Its textbook on expository writing consisted of essays by Black writers on African American life present and past. What caught my eye was an excerpt from an autobiographical account, *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northrop. Northrop, a citizen of New York, was kidnapped in 1841 and languished in slavery until rescued twelve years later from a cotton plantation in Louisiana. Since Northrop’s book was first published in 1853, I found it in the school library’s archives section. (It has since been republished.)

I was shaken to the core to learn, when condoned by law, people will use unspeakable cruelty, barbarism, and inhumanity—and consider it the norm. In my mind Northrop’s narrative ranks with Viktor Frankl’s well-known autobiographical description of his incarceration in Nazi death camps.

One time I mentioned code-switching to my Black students—and found them surprisingly defensive. There’s no such thing as Black English, they asserted; I as their professor was mistaken to think so. They took pains to assure me, they used English as well as anyone. I never spoke of code-switching again.

More recently I came across a book on language bias, *How You Say It* by Katherine Kinzler. Kinzler shows that we learn as children to “normalize” the bias. Have you ever noticed, she asks, until very recently bad guys in movies had foreign accents and many animals spoke in African American English? To this day, both children’s movies and the media for adults “feature a disheartening amount of linguistic bias . . . accents that people may perceive as ‘nonstandard’ are often portrayed negatively” (page 101). Kinzler then lists some of the most common examples from American culture:

Northern American English = smart
Southern American English = slow-witted
The Queen’s English = educated
Italian = beautiful
German = ugly
Russian = sinister (page 102).

In a chapter on the divisiveness of Language the author points out that, while racial, ethnic, and religious biases are no longer acceptable, language bias is condoned; worse, we are often unaware of perpetuating it ourselves. She cites the experience of Jamal, an ambitious Black student at her university who told her his high school guidance counselor advised him that as an African American young man, in order to be taken seriously he had to dress perfectly and *speak*

perfectly (emphasis Kinzler's). Jamal would switch back and forth between the dialect he used at the University of Chicago and the African American dialect he used at home. He told me that if he didn't code-switch—if he did not speak in a way he felt sounded more “white” at school—he was less respected by others. To feel welcome (sadly), Jamal felt he had to modulate his speech (pp. 77/8).

Kinzler is adamant that we must recognize—and change—our tendency to indulge in language bias. To drive home the point she uses the case of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American who was shot dead by a “neighborhood watch” vigilante who trailed him through a gated Florida community on February 26, 2012. Martin had been on the way home after a purchase of candy. In July 2013, a jury of six white women found George Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder. Zimmerman claimed self-defense, even though in the moments up to his death, Martin was on the phone with Rachel Jeantel, who heard the horrifying last moments of her friend's life. She described how over the phone, Martin said that Zimmerman was “creepy” and was following him. According to Jeantel, Martin was trying to get away, not trying to assault Zimmerman (page 125).

Jeantel testified for six hours and should have been the prosecution's star witness. However, her testimony was ignored. Astoundingly, the prosecuting attorney did not see it coming and did not insist on a fair representation of Black jurors.

Jeantel spoke in a dialect of African American English—related to American English, certainly, but one that was different from the dialect spoken by the jurors and, critically, one that is often stigmatized. Clips of the way she talked were mocked on social media. One juror reported later that the jury did not take her testimony into account during their sixteen hours of final deliberation. Talking later on CNN about the trial, another juror explained why: she just seemed “hard to understand” and “less credible” (page 126).

Kinzler is furious over the linguistic discrimination leveled against Jeantel but fails to comment on the prosecutor's errors, neither does she allude to the O. J. Simpson trial in 1995. In both cases prosecuting attorneys allowed the defense attorneys to stack the jury, which resulted in acquittals in both.

Why does this happen so regularly? Lack of attention on the part of the prosecution while the defense recognizes pitfalls to avoid or to exploit?

Kinzler does point out that often we understand another's dialect quite well but think another person of our background might not; so, for their sake, we'll dismiss the speaker ourselves.

Jeantel “did not have a fighting chance as a witness,” writes the author, and “neither did justice.”

And the Martin case is hardly the only example of people with nonstandard dialects marginalized by the courts. She cites a researcher's findings across the globe. John Rickford's cases include Aboriginal speakers in Australia, Viennese working-class speakers in Austria, and Jamaican Creole speakers in the UK. More damning yet, “*people tend to perceive accents that sound*

higher in status as also sounding less guilty, a finding that tells you a bit about the tremendous real-life consequences that biases toward speech can have” (page 126).

Typically, people are unaware of accent discrimination, Kinzler repeatedly observes, along with educational and legal institutions. *“When people discriminate against others based on their speech, they may not realize they are doing it. . . . Indeed, linguistic bias still seems permissible (emphasis Kinzler’s) in a way that other biases no longer are” (page 127).*

In other words, we have some learning to do, maybe even some soul-searching.