



Preventing Linguistic Racism and Discrimination

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In brief, linguistic discrimination is when individuals are mistreated and/or devalued based on their language use. Victims of such discrimination may use dialects such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or speak home languages like Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic (among countless others). Such usages are often characterized as inferior to dominant languages and speakers and writers may be made to feel inferior based on their use of a non-standard dialect. These acts may occur in many public spaces, including schools, colleges, and the workplace.

Paul Kroskrity (2021) suggests that such thinking about language usage has perpetuated ideologies about white supremacy through the insistence that “Monoglot Standard” English is the only acceptable form of linguistic expression in the United States. As Kroskrity suggests, this pattern “simultaneously elevates the variety of white middle and upper classes while lowering any alternative forms of speaking associated with other groups” (p. 183). As Kroskrity further explains, there is “a prescriptive insistence that Standard English is singularly correct and that all other languages and social dialects are inferior” (p. 183).



Acts of linguistic discrimination are pervasive in society; they occur in a variety of settings and within small and large group interactions. Some acts (such as jeering and bullying) are obvious whereas others may be more covert. One example of discrimination is suggesting a person's accent is "too difficult" to understand. Another example of linguistic discrimination is when a person does not take the time to learn the proper pronunciation of someone else's name. More sweeping acts of discrimination include using written language in public forums (such as on an employment application or in a resource regarding state laws) that is particularly difficult to understand (rather than writing in clear, succinct prose which would be easier for a more general readership to understand).

Educator and activist April Baker Bell explains that "sociolinguists and language scholars have for decades described the harm an uncritical language education has on Black students' racial and linguistic identities and called for new approaches. **Anti-black linguistic racism refers to the linguistic violence, persecution, dehumanization, and marginalization that Black Language (BL) speakers endure when using their language in schools and in everyday life. It includes teachers' silencing, correcting, and policing students when they communicate in BL**" (p. 9). Baker Bell further notes

“it is the belief that there is something inherently wrong with BL; therefore, it should be eradicated. It is denying Black students the right to use their native language as a linguistic resource during their language and literacy learning. It is requiring that Black students reject their language and culture to acquire White Mainstream English” (p. 9). Baker Bell and other educators and activists call for a more nuanced approach to Black Language use in the classroom, exploring how to empower students to speak, plan, and to write in their own dialect.

Linguistic racism can lead to negative emotions in victims such as shame and guilt. Minoritized speakers might become ashamed of speaking their home language or in their home dialect. “The only thing worse than Black students experiencing anti-black linguistic racism in classrooms is when they internalize it. When Black students’ language practices are suppressed in classrooms or they begin to absorb messages that imply that BL is deficient, wrong, and unintelligent, this could cause them to internalize anti-blackness and develop negative attitudes about their linguistic, racial, cultural, and intellectual identities and about themselves” (Baker Bell, p. 10). Such messaging and negative attitudes, in turn, may have a detrimental impact on students’ ability to succeed in a course and in higher education altogether.

How to Support Students and Prevent Linguistic Discrimination

To support students as well as the University of Detroit Mercy’s mission, there are several steps educators can take to create inclusive spaces for students to speak in their voices and to prevent such acts of linguistic discrimination in the classroom. The following is a list of broad techniques to prevent linguistic discrimination:

- Provide students with opportunities to express themselves using their dialects and languages in class.
- Bilingual Students may wish to study, journal, or prewrite in their home language as well as to locate research articles in their home language.
- Teach students to write and communicate via the standards for your field, but without criticizing/or shaming their use of a dialect or home language.
- Acknowledge Black language in the curriculum and study/value Black language on its merit, rather than defining it as a departure from white mainstream English.
- Assign readings by Black language scholars, Asian American scholars, Latinx scholars, and others who offer diverse points of view.
- When grading projects that include written and oral communication, bring focus to critical



thinking and the big picture ideas-not just grammar.

-Use transparent grading policies and rubrics and provide opportunities for formative assessment and feedback. Ask students if they want feedback on how well they are meeting the expectations of professional and mainstream communication. If they would like such a review, provide information without being punitive.

-Aim to understand your students in their written and oral communication. Ask them about their home languages and learn about their modes of expression.

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