



THE HIDDEN POWER OF LANGUAGE

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LANGUAGE VARIATION

An inescapable fact about language is that it naturally varies:

- human bodies differ in size and shape
- human bodies differ in how they move
- physical reality is never perfectly exact

Our linguistic system must be designed to tolerate and process this variation so that we can successfully communicate.

LANGUAGE VARIATION

This variation includes people shifting their language to match the language around them:

- for the duration of a single conversation
- as part of acquiring language as a child
- within a community or social group over long periods of time

As certain social groups converge on certain linguistic patterns, we begin to associate those patterns with those groups.

LANGUAGE VARIATION

We can use those associations to efficiently communicate social identity, without having to explicitly state it.

For example, Canadians use the word *toque*, so anyone who uses the word *toque* is communicating a Canadian identity (whether intentionally or not).

But these associations can also be problematic...

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

Some social identities are prestigious (rich, white, educated, etc.), so their associated linguistic patterns carry the same prestige and often become standardized:

- taught in school
- used for publishing, laws, etc.
- possibly even officially codified by regulatory bodies: Office québécois de la langue française in Québec, Académie française in France, RAE in Spain, etc.

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

Conversely, the linguistic patterns of stigmatized social identities end up also becoming stigmatized.

Importantly, the difference between prestigious and stigmatized language is purely social, not linguistic! Stigmatized language is not inherently illogical or ill-formed, just socially disadvantaged.

All language varieties are equally *valid*, but not equally *valued*.

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

The association between identity and language can create an unjust cycle of continued discrimination against certain social identities, with stigmatized language being a proxy for stigmatized identities, even long after explicit targeted discrimination against those identities is not acceptable.

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

For example, people living in poverty face a variety of obstacles to education, so they must work harder than their affluent peers to learn the same material.

- less money to hire tutors
- need to spend more time helping family (so they have less study time)
- less comfortable home environment
- less food security
- less access to quality healthcare
- less safe neighbourhood
- all of which increases psychological burden

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

Additionally, since their linguistic patterns are stigmatized, they are further from the standardized form.

This means they have to work harder to learn the differences and become fluent in the standardized form.

If the differences are large enough, being smarter and working harder may not even be enough for them to change their linguistic patterns to convincingly match the standardized form.

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

The pernicious twist here is that proficiency in standardized language is often used as a supposedly objective measure of education, intelligence, or work ethic, but in fact, it is just a different way to discriminate against groups who are already marginalized.

Indeed, some people may be smarter and harder workers, but if their starting point is farther behind, they will appear to be less accomplished.

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

Not being fully fluent in a standardized language makes people less hireable for higher paying jobs, less likely to get into top-tier universities, etc.

Even well-intentioned people may use language proficiency as a decision tool, wrongly thinking it is objective and not recognizing that it is rooted in other forms of discrimination.

LINGUISTIC PRESTIGE & STIGMA

KEY MESSAGE

Speaking with an accent or using stigmatized language is not a reliable marker of intelligence, education, or work ethic! It is more accurately a marker of social identity.

Making decisions based on stigmatized language is thus making decisions based on identity.

PERCEPTION

Many studies have shown an effect of racialization and perceived intelligibility (Rubin 1992, Kang and Rubin 2009, etc.).

For example, Babel and Russell (2015) found that when recordings of native speakers of Canadian English are paired with their faces versus heard as audio-only, the Chinese Canadians are rated *less intelligible and more accented when their faces are visible*.

This effect doesn't happen for white Canadians.

PERCEPTION

This has many potential consequences, because believing that someone is less intelligible may lead to misunderstanding their speech, because we paradoxically put in less effort into processing less intelligible speech!

If people think you are less intelligible, you may be graded more harshly, denied employment or other opportunities, face hurdles in the legal or healthcare systems, etc.

PERCEPTION

In addition, we may also find those speakers less *credible*, which can have serious real-world consequences, especially in legal settings (Rickford and King 2016).

A prominent example comes from the 2013 trial in the States of George Zimmerman, who was accused of second-degree murder for killing Trayvon Martin.

A key witness was Rachel Jeantel, Martin's close friend, who he was on the phone with while being stalked and attacked by Zimmerman.

PERCEPTION

Jeantel's six hours of testimony was a significant portion of the prosecution's case. She reported on events as she had heard over the phone, but her testimony, delivered in Black English, was ultimately disregarded by the largely white jury, and Zimmerman was acquitted.

One juror said she found Jeantel "not credible", and another said that Jeantel's testimony was not brought up at all in the 16+ hours of deliberation and that it played no role in the verdict.

PERCEPTION

KEY MESSAGE

In essence, a murderer may have been set free simply because the key witness spoke a particular dialect that is so stigmatized that merely speaking it was enough to completely eliminate her credibility due to underlying racism.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

A related effect is reported in much work on housing discrimination, as in the pioneering work of John Baugh (as reported in Purnell et al. 1999).

Baugh is fluent in three different accents of American English (white, Black, and Chicano), and he used all three with the same script to inquire over the phone about advertised housing in different areas of the San Francisco Bay area in California.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

Overall, when using white-accented English, Baugh got roughly a 60–70% response rate across the board, in all five neighborhoods.

But with his Black and Chicano accents, the response rate was as low as 20–30% in predominately white neighbourhoods.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

A similar effect can be seen even in just what name an applicant has (and thus, what language and identity they have).

Hogan and Berrie (2011) performed a similar experiment in Toronto, but with email instead of phone calls, using identical wording to inquire about advertised housing, just changing the names of the sender, using stereotypically white, Black, East Asian, Arabic, and Jewish names.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

They found that nonresponse and additional rental conditions (asking for employment status, a deposit, etc., not required of other senders) were both common forms of discrimination.

White and Jewish names had a higher response rate and fewer additional rental conditions than other names, and Black and Arabic names faced the most discrimination of the five groups, with Asian names in the middle.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

KEY MESSAGE

Based on language or even just a name suggesting a language, prospective tenants may face unjust barriers to housing.

COURT REPORTING

Another legal context where language matters is transcriptions made by court reporters, which are important archives of legal proceedings serving a variety of purposes.

Court reporters in the States and Canada are certified at high accuracy rates (95–98%), but in a study by Jones and colleagues (2019), court reporters in Philadelphia performed much worse with Black English, around 60% accuracy for sentences, with no reporter in the study getting above 80%, and one getting 18%.

COURT REPORTING

Note that this study was performed in *ideal experimental conditions*, including allowing for repeated playback of the sentences.

Even just looking at individual words instead, their accuracy was only about 83% on average, ranging from a low of 58% to a high of 91%, all still below the required minimum.

The errors altered the fundamental meaning of over 30% of the sentences.

COURT REPORTING

For example, “he don’t be in that neighbourhood” was mistranscribed by multiple reporters as “we going to be in that neighbourhood”.

Note that even correctly transcribing it may still result in a wrong interpretation: “he don’t be” is a special construction in Black English called a habitual. This means he is not *usually* in the neighbourhood, but many people unfamiliar with the structure of Black English may wrongly think it means he isn’t *currently* there.

COURT REPORTING

Other errors included utter nonsense, presumably under the notion that transcribing *something* was better than nothing. An example of this is transcribing “Mark sister friend been got married” as “wallets is the friend big”(!!!).

Again, someone unfamiliar with Black English might not understand the original, even if transcribed correctly. The possessive marker -'s is often left off in Black English, and *been* here mean a long time ago, thus, Mark's sister's friend got married a long time ago.

COURT REPORTING

In addition to the numerous errors they made, the court reporters also revealed troubling attitudes about the speakers, either in their paraphrases (often interpreting criminality where none existed in the original) or in their comments about the speakers (for example, “The tenses drive me crazy!”, “What does that mean?”, and “I can’t stand when people talk like that” for a language they transcribe every day and are supposed to be competent with and professionally neutral towards).

COURT REPORTING

KEY MESSAGE

Even highly trained professionals who deal with a specific stigmatized language may make egregious errors and hold strong negative opinions, which can have disastrous effects.

AMBIGUITY & PRIMING

Consider this video with ambiguous audio, posted on TikTok by user @ksstiles1116 (Kegan Stiles).

www.tiktok.com/@ksstiles1116/video/6970367683615395077

You can hear completely different messages, depending on which words you are looking at.

Similar effect as the popular *Laurel/Yanny* and *brainstorm/green needle* examples.

AMBIGUITY & PRIMING

KEY MESSAGE

If you are already primed to believe something (such as a suspect being guilty, a witness being unreliable, a person being a lazy worker, etc.), ambiguous language may be misunderstood to support your beliefs.

ISSUES FOR THE DEAF

Beyond racialized accents, there are other very different ways in language matters, especially for deaf people.

For example, although deaf people are allowed to serve on juries in Canada (though only since 1998), they are still underrepresented on juries, often being dismissed because they are incorrectly perceived as mentally unable to carry out their duties, with deafness being equated to lack of intelligence (Paget 2020).

ISSUES FOR THE DEAF

Although deaf people are often provided with interpreters for American Sign Language or Langue des signes Québécoise, some deaf people do not use those languages, such as the defendant in *R. v. Suwarak* (1999) in Nunavut, who only knew Inuit Sign Language, and no interpreters existed at the time; after a two-year delay due to further investigation of the linguistic situation, the man entered a guilty plea (MacDougall 2001).

ISSUES FOR THE DEAF

KEY MESSAGE

In additional to barriers in the legal system, there are many other linguistic hurdles for deaf people throughout society:

- accessibility of transit (next time you're on the TTC, think about how much information is transmitted by audio alone: delays, ends of service, etc.)
- accessibility of education, healthcare, etc.
- employment discrimination

SUMMARY

Variation in language is often linked to variation in social identity.

This can result in linguistic discrimination serving as a proxy for social discrimination, with people (wrongly) believing it is something more objective.

It isn't!

SUMMARY

KEY MESSAGE

Don't be a jerk to other people simply because of which language varieties they use.

THANK YOU!

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