

**Attitude change is not enough:  
Disrupting deficit grading practices to disrupt dialect prejudice**

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**Abstract.** If we wish to truly dismantle the linguistic hegemony in our schools, we must not only improve negative attitudes toward vernacular dialects, but we must also unseat discriminatory grading practices. Teachers may understand that vernacular dialects are differently patterned, not deficient, but if they do not learn grading practices embodying the difference approach, then dialect discrimination remains. In sum, this paper a) demonstrates the need for change in grading practices in dialectally diverse classrooms, b) illustrates teacher resistance to learning salient grammar (SAE and AAVE) underlying change of practice and c) suggests that addressing discriminatory grading practices is the next frontier of in the work of linguistic social justice.

**Keywords.** AAVE; dialect prejudice; grading; deficit grading; contrastive analysis; code-switching; grammar; fear of grammar; Standard English

**1. Introduction.** We know that the lay public has remained largely innocent of linguistic insight into the systematic, rule governed nature of language and dialects. Indeed, Wolfram finds that “misinformation and myths about the nature of African-American speech are so pervasive in our society that it is akin to a modern geophysicist maintaining that the planet Earth is flat” (<https://news.ncsu.edu/2017/03/wolfram-q-and-a-2017/>). Dialect prejudice (Lippi-Green 2011), dominant language ideology (Godley et al. 2007), and linguistic profiling (Baugh, 1999) lie at the core of how the lay public sees language.

By contrast, linguists have long recognized (Labov 1972a, 1972b) and combatted this deficit view, trying to bring a difference perspective on dialect diversity. From LSA’s establishment of the Committee on Language in the School Curriculum (LISC 1992) to transcontinental projects in dialect awareness in K-12 education (Denham & Lobeck 2010; Hazen 2014; Reaser & Wolfram 2007; Sweetland 2006; Wheeler & Swords 2006, 2015), to dialect awareness in university environments (Dunstan et al. 2015), including teacher education (Charity-Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Denham & Lobeck 2010; Hazen 2014; Reaser et al. 2017), linguists have worked hard to change the public’s deficit attitudes toward language in general and vernacular varieties in particular.

However, this paper argues that while attitude change is necessary, it is not sufficient to unseat dialect prejudice in the classroom. I argue that beyond changing attitudes, we must also foster change in teacher practice, specifically, teacher grading practices in the English Language Arts classroom.

To make this case, I analyze two kinds of data: artifacts from in-service teachers, and data from pre-service teacher education students. In each case the educators, both pre- and in-service had worked through a dialect awareness curriculum. Results show that even after experiencing a

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substantial dialect awareness training, in-service teachers persist in a deficit view of dialect diversity, assessing AAVE features as errors in Standard English, and resisting change in grading practice. Data from teacher education students' classwork and semester-end evaluations reveal ongoing reluctance to learn the structures of grammar (Standard English and AAVE) sufficiently to cease assessing AAVE as mistakes in Standard English.

If we wish to truly dismantle the dialect prejudice so chronically and systemically present in our schools, I argue we must move beyond changing knowledge of and attitudes toward vernacular dialects, to address discriminatory grading practices. Teachers may understand that vernacular dialects are differently patterned, not deficient, but if they do not learn grading practices embodying the difference approach, then dialect discrimination remains. In sum, this paper a) demonstrates the need for change in grading practices in dialectally diverse classrooms, b) illustrates teacher resistance to learning salient grammar (SAE and AAVE) underlying change of practice and c) suggests that addressing discriminatory grading practices is the next frontier in the work of linguistic social justice.

**2. In-service teachers persist in deficit grading after dialect awareness program.** In 2007-2008, as part of a grant funded by the State Council of Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV), I led a 2-day summer institute for middle and high school teachers on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Focusing on dialect awareness, and linguistically informed approaches to addressing dialect diversity, specifically African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as relevant to the local, rural population, we explored basic insights in dialect awareness:

- If you speak a language, you speak a dialect of that language
- All dialects are patterned, regular and rule governed
- All dialects are linguistically equal, even if socially unequal
- "As we see a people, so we see their language; As we see a language, so we see a people" (paraphrase of Walt Wolfram)

We explored Appalachian dialect patterns and Chicano English patterns, Southern English and AAVE, noting that speakers of these dialects were following patterns, not making mistakes in Standard English. And so, we distinguished prescriptive vs. descriptive approaches to language.

Then, we looked at student writing samples from local students illustrating transfer of AAVE features into student writing, and we explored the grammar of the top 10 most common AAVE patterns. We talked about our purpose – adding the patterns of Standardized American English to the students' linguistic toolboxes.

I led participants to build contrastive analysis charts as a teaching tool, an alternative to the red-pen error hunt. For example, we began with the T-Chart for showing possession as in Figure 1.

SHOWING POSSESSION	
<p><b>HOME</b></p> <p>We went to my <u>aunt house</u>.</p> <p>A <u>giraffe neck</u> is very long.</p> <p>My <u>dog name</u> is Princess.</p> <p>I made <u>people beds</u>.</p> <p>Be good for <u>Annie mom</u>.</p>	<p><b>SCHOOL</b></p> <p>We went to my <u>aunt's house</u>.</p> <p>A <u>giraffe's neck</u> is very long.</p> <p>My <u>dog's name</u> is Princess.</p> <p>I made <u>people's beds</u>.</p> <p>Be good for <u>Annie's mom</u>.</p>
<p><b>THE PATTERN</b></p> <p>owner + what is owned</p>	<p><b>THE PATTERN</b></p> <p>owner + 's + what is owned</p>

Figure 1. T-chart contrasting possessive patterns in home vs. school English<sup>1</sup>

I explained that this chart represented a graphic organizer for responding to student writing. The column on the left, Home English, lists examples of AAVE possession the teacher had found in her students' writing. Then, in the right-hand column, marked "School" the teacher would offer corresponding Standard English equivalents. Under each column, the teacher would write a reminder – "The Pattern," visually represented that each variety follows a grammatical pattern.

We saw how to lead students to discover the pattern of the home – A teacher might ask, "How do these sentences show possession?" Students would discover and name the vernacular pattern – 'owner + what is owned.' Then, the teacher would lead the class in parallel activity – "How do the sentences in the School column show possession?" Students then discover and describe that pattern, 'owner + 's + what is owned.' And in the training sessions, we unpacked how a linguistically informed approach uses value-neutral terms, as in Figure 2.

And so, we proceeded with dialect awareness, contrastive analysis, and code-switching, exploring 10 lesson units for the dialectally diverse classroom. Teachers reported new attitudes toward their students, a blossoming respect for students' language and for the students themselves. Teachers reported: "I am just so relieved to have a way to see students as *having* not *lacking* language, to find a path to respect my students."

<sup>1</sup> Image from Wheeler & Swords (2010:32).



In Figure 3, we see evidence of this 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher returning immediately to deficit grading. Interlineally and in the margin, she corrects for mechanics, Standard English grammar, and point of view. But also, crucially, the teacher corrects dialect transfer as Standard English error. While I have analyzed this sample in detail elsewhere (Wheeler 2019:112), suffice it to say that improved attitudes from our dialect awareness training were insufficient to unseat dialect prejudice in the grading classroom.

In sum, teachers may report improved attitudes through dialect awareness training, but if their on-the-ground grading practices do not change, dialect discrimination in grading remains. Figure 3 suggests that dialect awareness trainings need to include or be paired with a practicum on how to take vernacular into account when responding to and grading student writing.

### **3. Pre-service education students welcome dialect awareness, but wonder “when can we grade”?**

3.1. EDUCATION STUDENTS WELCOME DIALECT AWARENESS. As part of our Master of Arts in Teaching program at Christopher Newport University, we long offered a teacher education course on *Language Varieties in American Schools*, a class designed to inform education students about dialect diversity and linguistically informed approaches to vernacular dialects. Focusing specifically on African American Vernacular English (AAVE), I would begin the semester by anchoring in students’ existing attitudes toward dialect diversity. The first night, students would comment on two student essays, each showing considerable transfer of dialect features. The first was from Julie Sweetland’s dissertation (2006), showing an essay written by an Ohio 4<sup>th</sup> grade student as in Figure 4. The second essay as in Figure 5 showed a portion of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student writing from the Eastern Shore of Virginia, also manifesting considerable AAVE transfer. I directed students to respond to any grammar issues they saw in these papers, while leaving aside issues of mechanics (spelling, capitalization, or mechanics).

Some students who had studied *Introduction to Linguistics* proceeded with a more linguistically informed analysis. But many who had never encountered linguistics came with the usual assumptions about difference as deficit; My graduate education students assessed: “These children are struggling.” “They don’t know possession. Or plurality.” “They must be foreign.” “They don’t know subject verb agreement.” “They are leaving off ‘s’ on the verb,” “forgetting the apostrophe s.” Error, mistake, struggle, confusion. With metronomic regularity, the same descriptors emerged across the 15 years I taught this course.

From that kick off, I told education students that we would discover that the children who wrote the essays in Figures 4 and 5 are American students, and that the students know very clearly and precisely how to show possession, plurality and how to make subjects and verbs agree. Indeed, these students follow perfectly the rules of their community dialect, the language variety linguists call African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I would briefly illustrate the contrastive patterns of possession across AAVE and Standard English using a T-chart, filling in several AAVE possessive examples, and showing the SAE counterpart as in Figure 1. We would note many patterns characterizing each variety. I would summarize that all dialects are regular, rule governed signaling systems and that if you speak a language, you speak a dialect of that language.

Dear Mr. W [redacted]

I hope you be a good Prenchble  
this year. I like to swim alot.  
I Ben going her for a long  
time. I do not get in trouble alot  
But sometimes I do get  
in trouble. I go out side  
for a long time at home  
I have a brother and two  
sister. My Brother name is  
Darius [redacted]. One of my sister  
live with me But My other  
one do't live with me. She  
live with my Dad. Every  
two weeks I go over  
my Dad house. I like  
to do math alot. I still  
wont to larn more about  
math. I need help on other  
things. I like to ride my  
Bike around hills. I go to  
the park with the swings  
and with the two Basket  
Ball hops.

from  
Damon [redacted]

Figure 4. Ohio 4<sup>th</sup> grade student writing<sup>4</sup>

We explored issues of the Black/White achievement gap, also known as the opportunity gap (Fordham & Ogbu 1986, Barton & Coley 2010), and issues of “acting white” (Fryer 2006, Ogbu 2003). We studied dominant language ideology (Alim 2005, Godley et al. 2007), details of vernacular dialects in community schools (Adger et al. 2006, Reaser et al. 2017), and educational approaches to AAVE (Barton & Coley 2010, Pullum 2001, Sweetland 2006, Wheeler 2005, Wheeler & Swords 2006, Wilkinson et al. 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Image from Sweetland (2006:1).

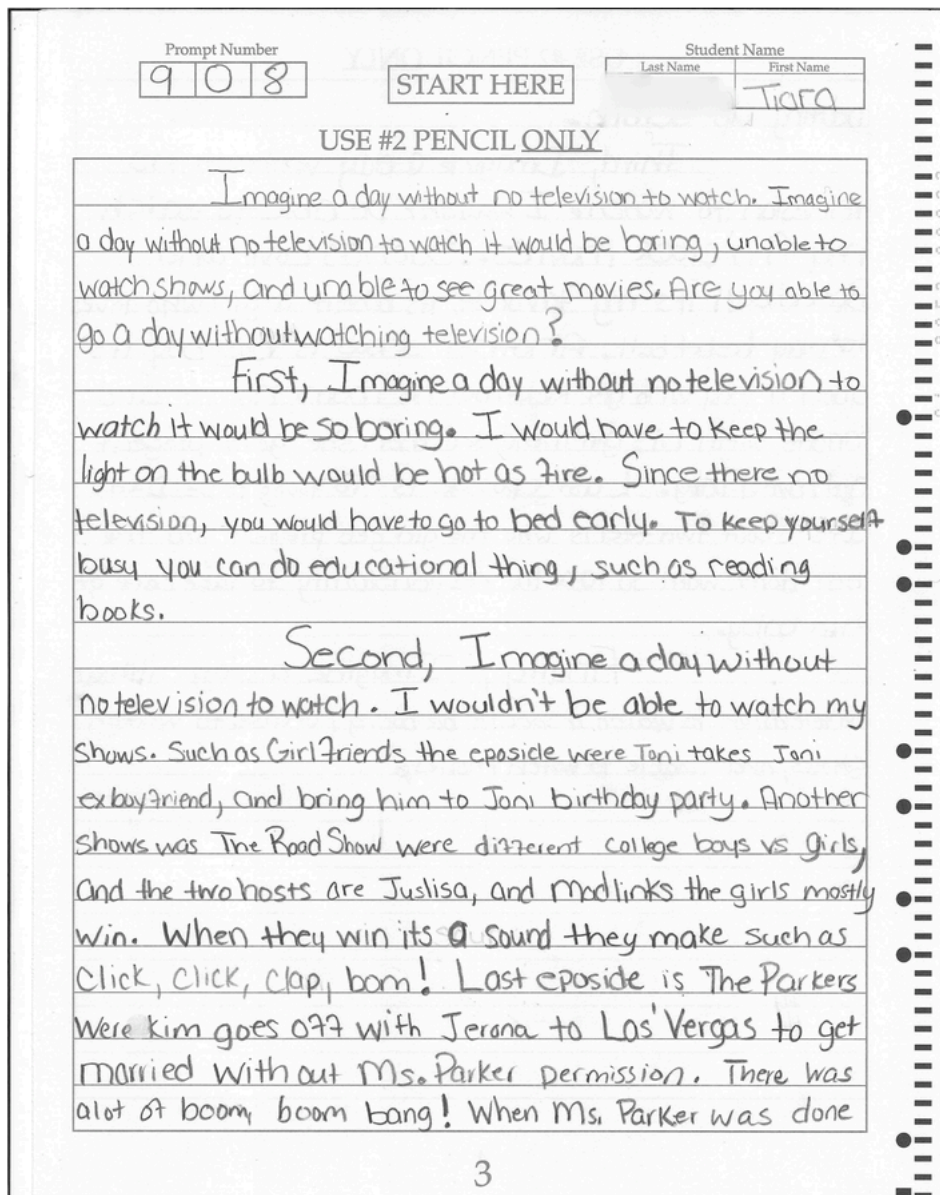


Figure 5. Rural Eastern Shore of Virginia, 8th grade student writing<sup>5</sup>

We studied dialect awareness from the *North Carolina Language and Life* curriculum (Reaser & Wolfram 2007) so education students could discover patterns of regional dialects such as ‘a-prefixing’ and ‘the southern vowel pronunciation.’ Students came to see language as patterned.

We explored how to use contrastive analysis and code-switching as linguistically informed responses to AAVE in the classroom (Taylor 1989, Wheeler & Swords 2004, 2006, 2010, 2015),

<sup>5</sup> This image from Wheeler (2010:956).

and we learned about vernaculars in education, as in the Oakland Ebonics Resolution, and the Black English Trial (Alim 2005).

3.2. “BUT WHEN CAN WE GRADE?” I had taught *Language Varieties in American Schools* for many years, receiving consistently strong teacher evaluations throughout. Education students were startled, and sobered to learn of dominant language ideology, of the achievement gap/opportunity gap, and to realize that they themselves had previously held beliefs rife with dialect prejudice. They were grateful for newly opened eyes and improved attitudes. They appreciated learning linguistically informed approaches of contrastive analysis and code-switching and they wanted to spread the word.

Yet throughout the semester, students continued to ask “but when can we *grade* the students?” and “Our job is to teach Standard English, how does this jibe with our mission?” Pair this with the longstanding documentation of African American students being assessed below their white peers on virtually every measure of academic achievement, erroneously assigned to special education for speech remediation (Ansell 2011, Baugh 1999, Barton & Coley 2010, Co-drington et al. 2012, Education Trust 2014, Ferguson 2007, Jencks & Phillips 1998, Labov 1972a, 1972b) and mis-assessed on reading level (Wheeler, Cartwright & Swords 2012), and I had to wonder if my education students would continue to mis-assess writing showing AAVE feature transfer. Considering the in-service teacher’s response in Figure 3, it seemed quite likely the corrective red pen would prevail as my education students entered their future classrooms.

Accordingly, I decided to teach more details of the Standard English verb string, reasoning that if we are going to successfully compare and contrast the language of the home to the language of the school, we needed a firm command of both. Understanding that “knowledge about” is distinct from “knowledge how,” I sought to take the next steps beyond dialect awareness, to where the rubber meets the road, in grammar and grading.

#### **4. Education students profoundly resistant to learning grammar and grammatical analysis**

4.1. RESISTANCE TO SAE AND AAVE GRAMMAR. The next semester, in addition to the units on dialect awareness, critical language awareness, dominant language ideology, code-switching and contrastive analysis, I taught education students grammatical analysis of the English verb string (Morenberg 2009), so they would be able to distinguish, for instance, AAVE regular past time (‘We walk all around the school last night’) from V +  $\emptyset$  (‘I have already turn on the TV’) from a participle used to modify a head noun (‘She have a friend name Raven’) (examples from Wheeler & Swords 2010, 2015:101-102), my teaching evaluations went from consistently strong to the lowest 10 percent. The lowest 10%.

Although lacking quantitative experimental evidence, I reasoned that without basic grammatical knowledge of both AAVE and SAE, future teachers would be unable to distinguish pattern in a different dialect from error in Standard English. So, undaunted, I tried again the next semester: dialect awareness, critical language awareness, dominant language ideology, code-switching and contrastive analysis, augmented by grammatical analysis of the English verb string. Yet again, with the grammatical unit added in, evaluations came back again, lowest 10%.

4.2. RESISTANCE TO ANALYZING ESSAYS FOR AAVE FEATURE TRANSFER. Semester #3, I redesigned *Language Varieties in American Schools*. This time, I went deeper into application, showing students how to analyze sets of essays for grammar transfer, thus modeling an approach they might follow in their future classrooms. I included a 4-week unit to teach how to identify AAVE grammar transfer into the writing of vernacular speaking students. I shared a packet of 14 student essays, modeling how to analyze each essay for AAVE grammar. In our program, an

entire graduate course was devoted to teaching writing, but that course addressed grammar not at all. Hence, any work on grammar fell to this sole graduate linguistics course. And so, we distinguished mechanics (punctuation, spelling, and capitalization) from contrasts with Standard English grammar. Our purpose was to design a ‘needs assessment’ to address AAVE feature transfer in school writing. I modeled how to go through an essay such as Figure 5, discovering multiple negation, copula deletion, possession, subject-verb agreement, ‘it is’ vs. ‘there are,’ unmarked determiner, and so on. I built and shared graphic organizers, where students could annotate features essay by essay, and then another organizer, where they could assemble their findings into a class summary that might guide them as they would teach the grammar component of writing workshop.

4.3. STUDENTS FOUND GRAMMAR DIFFICULT AND DAUNTING. All education students struggled with explicit knowledge of Standard English grammar, and all were explicit in their fear and insecurity with grammar, both SAE and AAVE.

- “Analyzing writing for AAVE features: I am immediately out of my depth, material is overwhelming” (Aaron). And yet
- “I skipped over [contrastive analysis readings] because I felt I grasped the meaning easily. I naturally understood the patterns represented in Standard English as I had been using them all my life. If a student were ever to use an ‘incorrect’ pattern such as AAVE, I would mark it in red pen that this was an error of sorts on their paper” (Aaron).
- “Grammar is a formidable opponent facing me on the field of education. Like the Israelites before Goliath, I quake with apprehension at the thought of the enemy” (Rory).
- “I’m afraid my weakness in grammar will prevent me from successfully analyzing data.” (Kris).
- “What I’m most nervous about, though, is finding these grammatical mistakes.” (Carly).
- “Grammar is by far my weakest area in life. I know for a fact I’d be better at under water hockey than grammar, and I have no idea what under water hockey is” (Kris).

They feared an inability to distinguish pattern from error and expressed a sense of inadequacy to recognize AAVE patterns, both the ones we had studied and those beyond our explorations.

4.4. “IT’S JUST TOO HARD. I’M JUST GOING TO COUNT ‘EM WRONG.”

At the end of semester three, after students had studied frequent SAE/AAVE grammar patterns, and had worked in groups, analyzing the 14-essay packet, after building a summary by student and collectively for the hypothetical class, I attempted to wrap up.

Wheeler: “So, now that we’ve finished learning how to identify vernacular patterns in student writing, what do you think?”

The class was silent a moment, and then a student from the front row volunteered her assessment:

Student: “You don’t really expect us to DO this do you?”

Wheeler: “I most certainly do.”

Student: “Well, it’s just too hard. I’m just going to count ‘em wrong.”

This was not the first time I had heard such sentiments. While working with a local middle school on the Virginia Peninsula, I had joined a teacher for our follow-up conference after the in-service training. With a student population over 95% African American, the school had suffered

in recent year-end testing and was searching for ways to improve teachers' abilities to respond to student need. So, they invited me to teach workshops in code-switching and contrastive analysis. After a month of after-school workshops and after teachers had been engaging with students' writing, we met. She told me: "I don't have time for all this PC stuff. I'm just going to mark them wrong."

Yes, changing how we understand and then assess dialect difference in student writing is difficult. Yet it is the work of social justice. And so, when my education student told us that "it's just too hard" and that she was "just going to count 'em wrong," I informed her and the class that if she did so, then she would stand as one more in a long, long line of perpetrators, raining injustice down on minority dialect students, that she would be committing racism and closing the door of the future on the students before her. Furthermore, I pointed out, her assessments of the student's writing would be wrong, indeed scientifically incorrect.

With that, I ended the class, and not just for the night.

After receiving that semester's evaluations, now the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester ranking my efforts at the lowest 10%, it was clear I could not continue this work. As the only linguist at my university, I filled out the paperwork to remove *Language Varieties in American Schools* from the university's course offerings. My students had made it manifestly clear that they would not learn the grammar and methods necessary to cease and desist on deficit grading against African American students. And I could not simply return to teaching the successful dialect awareness course now knowing that education students would perpetuate the most base and basic dialect prejudice through grading in their future classrooms.

**5. Conclusion.** Scholars of critical language awareness call for society to change its view of vernacular dialects and vernacular dialect speakers (Canagarajah 2011; Young 2007, 2009; Young & Martinez 2011). To that end, linguists have made remarkable strides helping change public attitudes in dynamic dialect awareness programs and community outreach. Yet, in my experience, while teachers welcome dialect awareness trainings and manifestly improve their attitudes toward dialect diversity as a result, other discriminatory perspectives and practices remain entrenched. In particular, "old habits of red pen are difficult to break" (Wheeler 2019:112-113).

Indeed, the point of this paper has been that disrupting discriminatory attitudes is not enough. We must also work to disrupt deficit grading practices in the classroom, for if we leave red pen correctionism intact, then the damage and disdain of dialect prejudice will continue, self-perpetuating, unchecked. Only when we finally confront and ameliorate day-to-day grading practices will we remove the yoke of dominant language ideology and dialect prejudice bearing down on vernacular dialect speakers in the classroom. I hope linguists in concert with curriculum designers, teachers and teacher educators will explore and make tracks in linguistically informed grading in the language arts classroom. May it be so.

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