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## SHOULD WRITERS USE THEIR OWN ENGLISH?

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*What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like? . . . First, you must clear your mind [of the following]: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.”*

Stanley Fish, “What Colleges Should Teach, Part 3”

Cultural critic Stanley Fish (2009d) come talkin bout—in his three-piece *New York Times* “What Should Colleges Teach?” suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should “clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world.” He say don’t no student have a right to they own language if that language make them “vulnerable to prejudice”; that “it may be true that the standard language is a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students.”

Lord, lord, lord! Where do I begin, cuz this man sho tryin to take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan try to dismiss race when he speak on language differences. But the two be sho nuff intertwined. Remember when a black person could get hanged from the nearest tree just cuz they be black? And they fingers and heads (double entendre intended) get chopped off sometime? Stanley Fish (2009a) say he be appalled at this kind of violent racism, and get even madder at the subtle prejudice exhibited nowadays by those who claim that race is dead, that racism don’t happen no mo. But it do happen—as Fish know—when folks don’t get no jobs or get fired from jobs and worse cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Appalachian accent or sound like whatever ain’t the status quo. And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come sayin that people make theyselves targets for racism if and when they don’t write and speak like he do.

But don't nobody's language, dialect, or style make them "vulnerable to prejudice." As Laura Greenfield point out in her chapter on racism and writing pedagogy in this collection, it's ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people's language. Like the way some view, say, Black English when used in school or at work. Black English don't make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language, like what Fish express in his *NYT* blog, that make it so.

This explain why so many bloggers on Fish's *NYT* comment page was tryin to school him on why teachin one correct way lend a hand to choppin off folks' tongues. But, let me be fair to my man Stan. He prolly unaware that he be supportin language discrimination, cuz he appeal to its acceptable form—standard language ideology, also called "dominant language ideology" (Lippi-Green 1997). Standard language ideology is the belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively. Dominant language ideology say peeps can say whateva the heck they want, howeva they want to—BUT AT HOME!

Don't get me wrong, Fish ain't all wrong. One of his points almost on da money—the one when he say teachers of writin courses need to spend a lot of time dealin straight with writin, not only with topics of war, gender, race, and peace. As a person who train and supervise writin teachers, I have observed too many syllabi that cover the rhetoric of the feminist movement, which is cool, but don't spend no time on effective sentence construction, the development of prose style, the conventions of argumentation, and the conventions of public discourse. Fish rightly ask teachers to pay mo attention to these matters. But he don't like no Black English and Native American rhetoric mixing with standard English. And this is a huge problem considerin that the concept of "standard English" is widely contested. Linguist John McWhorter (2001), for one, challenge the notion of a monolithic standard English in the very subtitle of his book *Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of "Pure" Standard English*. McWhorter agree with what Laura Greenfield say in her chapter, that "the terms *language, dialect, and variety*, and other such words intended to organize speech into coherent groupings are in fact themselves arbitrary markings" (42).

To me, what make these "markings," i.e., "standard" and "dialect," problematic, even though I use the designations myself, is that what we call standard English is part of a common language system that include

Black English and any other so-called variety of English. I'm not trying to say here that Black English don't have some rhetorical and grammatical features that differ from what is termed standard English. What I'm saying is that the difference between the two ain't as big as some like to imagine. McWhorter's own book title shows this, since it has what some would codify as black speech "word on the street" with what some would codify as standard speech (the myth of pure standard English).

This is why I got a big problem with the following advice that Fish (2009d) give to teachers:

If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, "I have a right to my own language," reply, "Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I'm here to teach you another one." (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it.

Fish got it wrong here. When we're talkin' bout so-called varieties of English or dialect in relation to standard English, we're not dealin' with two different languages; we're dealing with a common language. So in fact he *can't* teach "another one." When we/he teach English, we teachin' it with all its beautiful dialects that comprise it. And Fish should know better, seeing how often he himself has used the full range of English, even emphasizing its dialects to good effect (Fish 2002).

In addition, besides encouraging teachers to be snide and patronizing, Fish flat out confusin' (I would say he lyin', but Momma say be nice). You can't start off sayin', "Disabuse yo self of the notion that students have a right to they dialect" and then say to tell students, "Y'all do have a right." That be hypocritical. And ain't it disingenuous of Fish to ask, "Who could object to learning a second language?" when his whole argument is to convince writin' teachers to require students, the "multiculturals," to do the impossible, to leave they dialect behind and learn another one, the one he promote? If he meant everybody should be thrilled to learn another dialect, then wouldn't everybody be learnin' everybody's dialect? Wouldn't we all become multidialectal and plural-lingual? And when it comes to speakin' and writing English, ain't we all usin' a common language anyway, even if somebody over there speak it with this accent, and someone over here use it in that dialect? And that's my exact argument, that we all usin' a common language. And to the extent that folks use of that language differ, then we all should learn everybody's dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix of them in oral and written communication (Young 2007).

Of course, the argument to teach and learn the dialects of English and to understand how to exploit them in effective communication don't come originally from me. I borrow the idea from the 1974 Resolution on the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTTOL), specifically where it say, "Resolved, that NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] promote classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multiregional, multiethnic, and multicultural society, so that they too will understand the nature of American English" (Conference 1974). This resolution point up for me an important fact—that don't nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way, subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression. Everybody mix the dialect they learn at home with whatever other dialect or language they learn afterwards. That's how we understand accents; that's how we can hear that some people are from a Polish, Spanish, or French language background when they speak English. It's how we can tell somebody is from the South, from Appalachia, from Chicago, or any other regional background. We hear that background in they speech, and it's often expressed in they writin' too. It's natural (Coleman 1997).

But some would say, "You can't mix no dialects at work; how would peeps who ain't from yo hood understand you?" They say, "You just gotta use standard English." Yet, even folks with good jobs in the corporate world don't follow no standard English. Check this out: reporter Sam Dillon write about a survey conducted by the National Commission on Writing in 2004. He say "that a third of employees in the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as \$3.1 billion annually on remedial training."

Now, some peeps gone say this illustrate how Fish be right, why we need to be teachin mo standard grammar and stuff. If you look at it from Fish view, yeah it mean that. But if you look at it from my view, it most certainly don't mean that. Instead, it mean that the one set of rules that people be applyin to everybody's dialects leads to stereotypes that writers need "remedial training" or that speakers of dialects are dumb. Speakin and writin prescriptively, as Fish want, force people into patterns of language that ain't natural or easy to understand.

This unnatural language use is what my girl, linguist Elaine Richardson (2004), call "stereotype threat." This term applies when someone is forced in the face of racial perceptions to keep the most expressive parts of her language out of formal communication, whether writing or speakin, like when say, a black person is asked to keep her dialect out

of a school paper. Richardson says this causes “stereotype threat” and her language become neither expressive standard or expressive Black English but a stilted middle-brow discourse. A whole lot of folk could be writin and speakin real, real smart if Fish and others stop using one prescriptive, foot-long ruler to measure the language of peeps who use a yardstick when they communicate.

Instead of prescribing how folks should write or speak, I say we teach language descriptively. This mean we should, for instance, teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously. We should teach how to let dialects come together, sho nuff blend together, like blending the dialect Fish speak and the black vernacular that, say, a lot—certainly not all—black people speak.

See, people be mo plurilingual than we wanna recognize, as I will illustrate later. What I want to argue right now is that we need to enlarge our perspective about what good writin is and how good writin can look at work, at home, and at school. The narrow, prescriptive lens be messin writers and readers all the way up, cuz we all been taught to respect the dominant way to write, even if we don’t, can’t, or won’t ever write that one way ourselves. That be hegemony. Internalized oppression. Linguistic self-hate. But we should be mo flexible, mo acceptin of language diversity, language expansion, and creative language usage from ourselves and from others both in formal and informal settings. To better explain, take, for example, that time when Fish put former Harvard President Lawrence Summers on blast in 2002. What had happened was, Summers called Professor Cornell West to his office and went straight off on the brotha for writin books everybody could read, for writin clear, accessible scholarship. Summers apologized after the media got involved, sayin, “I regret any faculty member leaving a conversation feeling they are not respected.” Fish (2002) say, “In a short, 13-word sentence, the chief academic officer of the highest ranked university in the entire country, and therefore in the entire world, has committed three grammatical crimes, failure to mark the possessive case, failure to specify the temporal and the causal relationships between the conversations he has and the effects he regrets, and failure to observe noun-pronoun agreement.”

But get this: Fish’s correction of Summers is suspect, according to a grammar evaluation by linguist Kyoko Inoue (2002). Inoue say, “What the writer/speaker says (or means) often controls the form of the

sentence.” She say Summers’s intent make his sentence clear and understandable, not rules from the grammar police-man.

But Fish gone ignore Inoue again, as he did back then in 2002, when Fish used Summers’s example to try to force writin teachers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I was a graduate student, to teach more standard English grammar. Inoue gave Fish her analysis, but it didn’t change his mandate. Fish believe the examples of Summers and the corporate workers show reasons why we should teach mo standard grammar. He reasons that if corporations and high-ranked universities got folks who can’t write right, we gotta do a better job of teachin the rules. And since most of those workers are white, he gone also say he not supportin prejudice. He don’t like it when whites don’t speak right, just the same as he don’t like it when Latinos not speakin right. Race ain’t got nothin to do with it, he gone add. It be only about speakin and writin standard English. He say his words apply to everybody, not just to those who be wantin “a right to they own language.”

But here what Fish don’t get: standard language ideology insist that minority people will never become an Ivy League English department chair or president of Harvard University if they don’t perfect they mastery of standard English. At the same time the ideology instruct that white men will gain such positions, even with a questionable handle of standard grammar and rhetoric (Didn’t George W. get to be president for eight years, while all kinds of folks characterized his grammar as bad and his rhetorical style as poor? And hasn’t former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin made up words like *refudiate* for repudiate and *lamestream media* to poke fun at mainstream media? Just askin.) Fish respond that this the way our country is so let’s accept it. I say: “No way, brutha!”

Also, Fish use his experience teachin grad students as evidence for his claim. He say his grad students couldn’t write a decent sentence. Well, they wrote good enuf in they essays to get into grad school, didn’t they? And most grad schools admit students by committee, which mean some of his colleagues thought the grad students could write right. But it sound like Fish sayin he the only one who could judge what good writin is—not his colleagues. What is Fish really on, what is he really tryin to prove?

I, for one, sho ain’t convinced by Fish. I don’t believe the writin problems of graduate students is due to lack of standard English; they problems likely come from learnin new theories and new ways of thinkin and tryin to express that clearly, which take some time. New ideas don’t always come out clear and understandable the first few times they expressed.

And, further, grad students also be tryin too hard to sound smart, to write like the folk they be readin, instead of usin they own voices.

In my own experience teachin grad students, they also tend to try too hard to sound academic, often using unnecessary convoluted language, using a big word where a lil one would do. Give them students some credit, Fish! What you should tell them is there be more than one academic way to write right. Didn't yo friend Professor Gerald Graff (2003) already school us on that in his book *Clueless in Academe*? He say he tell his students to be bilingual. He say, say it in the technical way, the college-speak way, but also say it the way you say it to yo momma—in the same paper. Now that's some advice!

But Fish must don't like this advice. He say we should have students to translate the way they talk into standard English on a chalk board. He say, leave the way they say it to momma on the board and put the standard way on paper. This is wrongly called code switching. And many teachers be doin' this with they students. And it don't work. Why? Cuz most teachers of code switching don't know what they be talkin bout. Code switching, from a linguistic perspective, is not translatin one dialect into another one. It's blendin two or mo dialects, languages, or rhetorical forms into one sentence, one utterance, one paper. And not all the time is this blendin intentional, sometime it unintentional. And that's the point. The two dialects sometime naturally, sometime intentionally, coexist! This dialects coexisting in one is code switching from a linguistic perspective: two languages and speech act (Auer 1988).

But since so many teachers be jackin up code switching with they “speak this way at school and a different way at home,” we need a new term. I call it CODE MESHING! Code meshing is the new code switching; it's multidialectalism and plurallingualism in one speech act, in one paper.

Let me drop some code meshing knowledge on y'all. Code meshing what we all do wheneva we communicate—writin, speakin, whateva. Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts. This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it's sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there ain't just one way, sho nuff more than one way, to communicate formally.

Code meshing also be used to add flavor and style, like journalist Tomas Palermo (2007) do in the excerpt below from his interview with Jamal Cooks, professor of education. In his online article “Rappin’ about Literacy Activism,” Palermo write:

Teachers frequently encounter him on panels with titles like “The Expanding Canon: Teaching Multicultural Literature In High School.” But the dude is also hella down to earth. He was in some pretty successful “true-school” era hip-hop recording groups. . . . Meet the man who made it his passion to change the public education game, one class at a time.

With vernacular insertions such as “but the dude is also hella down to earth” (not to mention beginning a sentence with the conjunction “but”) and adding the colloquial “game” to “public education,” the article, otherwise composed in monodialect standard English, shift into a code meshed text.

Here some mo examples:

1. Iowa Republican Senator Chuck Grassley sent two tweets to President Obama in June 2009. His messages blend together common txtng abbrvs., standard English grammar, and a African American rhetorical technique:

First Tweet: “Pres Obama you got nerve while u sightseeing in Paris to tell us ‘time to deliver’ on health care. We still on skedul/even workin WKEND.”

Second Tweet: “Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said ‘time to delivr on healthcare’ When you are a ‘hammer’ u think everything is NAIL I’m no NAIL.” (Werner 2009)

2. Professor Kermit Campbell (2005) uses multiple dialects to compose *Gettin’ Our Groove On*, a study of college writing instruction. In it he say:

Middle class aspirations and an academic career have rubbed off on me, fo sho, but all hell or Texas gotta freeze over befo you see me coping out on a genuine respect and love for my native tongue. . . . That’s from the heart, you know. But I don’t expect a lot of folks to feel me. (3)

3. Chris Ann Cleland, a real estate agent from Virginia, express disappointment about President Obama’s economic plan in an interview with the *Washington Post*:

“Nothing’s changed for the common guy,” she said. “I feel like I’ve been punked.” (Rich 2009)



4. Referencing Cleland's remark, the title of *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich's (2009) Op-Ed article asks, "Is Obama Punking Us?"

Rich writes in the last paragraph of his article:

The larger fear is that Obama might be just another corporatist, punking voters much as the Republicans do when they claim to be all for the common guy.

The contraction "nothing's," the colloquial phrase "common guy," and the vernacular expression "punked," are neither unusual nor sensational. Yet, when these examples get compared to the advice teachers give about code switching, you get a glaring contradiction.

Students be told that vernacular language should be reserved for the playground with friends or at a picnic with neighbors, and that standard English be used by professionals at work, in academic writing, and when communicating with important officials. However, the colloquial language of two white, middle-aged professionals (Cleland and Rich), which appears in two of our nation's most highly regarded newspapers, prove this ain't so, at least not no mo and prolly never was. The BIG divide between vernacular and standard, formal and informal, be eroding, if it ain't already faded. And for many, it's a good thing. I know it sho be for me.

The Internet, among other mass media, as well as the language habits of America's ever-growing diverse ethnic populations, be affecting how everybody talk and write now, too. A term like *punked*, which come from black culture to describe someone getting tricked, teased, or humiliated, used to be taboo in formal communication as was black people wearin braided hair at work in the 1980s. The professional world has become more tolerant of black hair styles. And that same world not only toleratin but incorporatin, and appropriatin, black language styles—as they do black hairstyles.

Actor Ashton Kutcher popularized the term *punked* with his hit TV show of the same title. That's probably how the word seeped into the parlance of suburban professionals ("I feel punked"; "Obama . . . punking voters"), although it still retains its colloquial essence.

Fish may reply, "But these examples be from TV and journalism; those expressions won't fly in academic or scholarly writing." But did you read Campbell's book, *Fish*? What about Geneva Smitherman's (1997) *Talkin and Testifyin'*? Is you readin this essay? Campbell (2005) blends the grammars and rhetorical styles of both Black English and

so-called standard English, along with the discourse of Rap and Hip Hop. He also blend in oral speech patterns (with the phonological representation of words like *fo sho* and *befo*). And his book is published by an academic press and marketed to teachers of English. Campbell just one of so many books by academics—professors of language and writin studies, no less—who code mesh.

Still, Fish may say, “Yeah, but look, they paid their dues. Those profes-sors knew the standard rules of writin before they broke them.” To this kind of objection, Victor Villanueva (2006), a Puerto Rican scholar of American studies, as well as of language and literacy, point to “writers of color who have been using the blended form . . . from the get-go” (351). Villanueva makes this observation in a review of Candace Spigelman’s book *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*. In it he take exception with Spigelman’s notion that academics pay they dues by writin in formal traditional academic prose that excludes narrative first, and only when they done that, they turn to using stories in writin they research. But Villanueva point out that many academics of color find they first academic voice in narrative modes that come from the particular rhetorics of they cultural heritages. In other words, many writers from minority backgrounds don’t play academic games (do it this way first, then you can use story). As Villanueva put it, including himself among those who use the narrative voice first, “The blended form is our dues” (351). They don’t have to learn the rules to write right first; the blended form or code meshing is writin right.

This brings us back to Senator Grassley’s tweets. It’s obvious he learned some cool techno shorthand (e.g., “WKEND” and “delivr”). He also use both the long spelling of “you” and the abbrev. “u” in the same line. “We still on skedul” is a complete sentence; the backslash (“/”) that follow it function like a semicolon to connect the emphatic fragment to the previous thought. And the caps in “WKEND” and “NAIL” pump up the words with emphasis, which alleviate the need for formal exclamation marks.

Grassley’s message be a form of loud-talking—a Black English device where a speaker indirectly insult an authority figure. The authority figure is meant to overhear the conversation (thus loud-talking) so that the insult can be defended as unintentional. Grassley sent the message over his Twitter social network but he address Obama. He wanna point out what seem like a contradiction: If healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?

Grassley didn't send no standard English as a tweet. Twitter allow messages with 140 characters. The standard English question—If health-care reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?—is eighty characters. Why didn't Grassley use this question or compose one like it? Cuz all kinds of folks know, understand, and like code meshing. So Grassley code meshed.

Code meshing be everywhere. It be used by all types of people. It allow writers and speakers to bridge multiple codes and modes of expression that Fish say disparate and unmixable. The metaphorical language tool box be expandin, baby.

Plus code meshing benefit everybody.

In the 1970s linguist William Labov noted that black students were ostracized because they spoke and wrote black dialect. Yet he noted that black speakers were more attuned to argumentation. Labov say that “in many ways [black] working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class [white] speakers, who temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail” (Graff 2003, 37).

So when we teach the rhetorical devices of blacks we can add to the writing proficiency of whites and everybody else. Now, that's something, ain't it? Code meshing use the way people already speak and write and help them be more rhetorically effective. It do include teaching some punctuation rules, attention to meaning and word choice, and various kinds of sentence structures and some standard English. This mean too that good writin gone look and sound a bit different than some may now expect.

And another real, real, good result is we gone help reduce prejudice. Yes, ma'am. Now that's a goal to reach for.

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