Grappling with Linguistic Bias in the Classroom

by Naomi Shin, Eliza Forrest, Audriana Sauceda, Dawnadine Harvey, and Jill P. Morford—
Lobo Language Acquisition Lab, University of New Mexico

What is linguistic bias?

Linguistic bias refers to the preference for or prejudice against specific languages, dialects, or features of language use. Language varieties that are commonly denigrated in the United States include regional varieties like Southern English and New York City English (Niedzielski & Preston, 2009), as well as varieties associated with racial or ethnic groups, such as African American English and Chicano/a/x English. (See our Soleado article on Sociogrammar, Fall 2024). Sometimes features associated with young women, such as uptalk and vocal fry, are also disparaged (Cameron, 2015).

Linguistic bias can be found across languages and societies. For instance, the variety of American Sign Language associated with Gallaudet University is sometimes considered prestigious, while usages that stray from that variety are more often deemed 'incorrect' or less prestigious (Player, 2023). In our article, Sociogrammar (Soleado, Fall 2024), we outlined linguistic features that are routinely disparaged in English and Spanish that tend to be associated with rural, impoverished, or uneducated communities. Moreover, language features associated with bilingualism, such as code-switching and loanwords, are commonly considered less 'pure' than monolingual varieties. Yet, just as there is no such thing as a 'pure' or entirely homogenous community of people, there is no such thing as a 'pure' language or dialect (Irvine & Gal, 2000).

Google "the ugliest language" or "the ugliest dialect" and you will find thousands of examples of people espousing very ugly, mean, and disparaging opinions. Why do we have those opinions? A common myth is that we simply like the way one language or dialect sounds more than another. But the reality is that our perceptions are intimately tied to how we feel about the people who speak those languages and dialects. Perceptual dialectology research shows clear patterns linking negative perceptions of groups of people with negative perceptions of those people's speech patterns (Niedzielski & Preston, 2009). To put it simply, when you say you dislike the way someone talks, you're actually expressing a dislike for the person or the social group that the person belongs to. In fact, the language varieties and linguistic structures that are denigrated in society are those that are used by people who are the target of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, monolinguism, and other types of oppressive ideologies that pervade our society.

Linguistic discrimination

There is growing evidence that linguistic bias has very serious repercussions in our society. One clear example has to do with what John Baugh (2003, 2019) calls linguistic profiling. In a clever experiment, Baugh called various phone numbers that appeared in newspaper advertisements listing apartments for rent in San Francisco and nearby neighborhoods. Each time someone answered the phone, Baugh said the same sentence: "Hello, I'm calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper." He would first call using an accent that is associated with an African American or Chicano variety of English. Then he would call again using what he calls his "professional voice," which sounds like what is typically called 'Standard

—continued from page 4—

American English'. He found that the probability of obtaining an appointment to view the rental property increased when he used his "professional voice" and decreased when he used a Chicano or African American English accent. Sometimes, after he was told the apartment had been rented already, he called back using his "professional voice," and was offered an appointment to see the apartment (Baugh, 2003).

Another example can be found in court cases. Linguists John Rickford and Sharese King (2016) argue that during the case against George Zimmerman, who killed Trayvon Martin, jurors were strongly biased against Rachel Jeantel's testimony due to the way she spoke. Jeantel employed linguistic features associated with African American English, which is as linguistically complex and systematic as any other dialect (Baugh, 2015). Jurors' judgments damaged her reputation as a reliable witness.

Co-authors Dawnadine Harvey and Audriana Sauceda

Linguistic profiling can also lead to unlawful detainment. Two women in Montana who were in line in a gas station convenience store were detained by a Customs and Border Protection agent because he noticed they were speaking Spanish and declared that that was unusual in the area (Casillas, 2019).

Linguistic bias affects children in the classroom

We all have both explicit and implicit biases, and teachers are just as prone to such biases as other people (Starck et al., 2020). Such biases extend to language. For example, Crowl and MacGinitie (1974) recorded six Anglo-American and six African-American 9th-grade boys saying aloud identical answers to questions, differing only in speech patterns. White teachers assigned significantly higher grades to the answers recorded by the Anglo-American boys as compared to the African-American boys. Similar findings have been found when comparing African-American, Latino, and White ninth-graders (Shepherd, 2020). Chin (2010) reviews the results of accent bias in the classroom and shows that minoritized students who are perceived as having accents tend to receive lower grades, have issues accessing higher-track classes, and receive less attention from teachers.

It is worth noting that people's perceptions of accents are not always based on identifiable phonetic features. For example, Rubin (1992) played an identical recording of a 'teacher' giving a lecture in so-called 'Standard American English' to 62 undergraduate students who listened to the lecture while seeing an image of either a Caucasian woman or an Asian woman. Students reported hearing a 'foreign accent' more often when shown the image of the Asian woman even though the recordings were identical. Moreover, the students had more difficulty with comprehension of the lecture content when seeing the image of the Asian woman, suggesting that they not only perceived a 'foreign accent' but that this perception affected how they processed the language they were hearing.

To summarize, there is evidence that teachers show bias against students whom they perceive as having non-standard or foreign accents, resulting in decreased academic success.

What can we do to mitigate linguistic bias in the classroom?

Despite the prevalence of linguistic bias and its

often-unconscious nature, we can all play a role in combatting its harmful effects. As individuals, this starts with taking the following steps:

◊ Accept that you have bias: As with other types of bias, no one is immune to linguistic bias. Everyone makes judgements about language, and we often aren't even aware when we are doing it. Therefore, the first step in addressing linguistic bias is acknowledging we all have it.

◊ Identify your biases: Given that bias can be unconscious, this can be a difficult step. Begin by identifying the conscious linguistic judgements you make. This involves recognizing your reactions to language variation and questioning the judgements you make based on these reactions.

◊ Challenge your biases: Once you've identified a bias, examine the root of this judgment. What social and cultural factors may be shaping your perception of certain languages or linguistic features? How might your judgements reflect and reinforce stereotypes about marginalized groups in society? By challenging yourself to view your biases from a new perspective and with a deeper understanding of their underlying origin, you can actively work to change any biased attitudes and behaviors you may have.

To learn more about integrating these steps into your daily life, you can take the online Linguistic Bias Training (*https://bilingualism.unm.edu/resources/linguistic-bias-training.html*). This 15-minute training was developed by the Lobo Language Acquisition Lab and consists of three parts. The first part reviews linguistic diversity, with special attention to diversity in New Mexico. The second part explains linguistic bias, and the third part discusses the repercussions of linguistic bias and how to mitigate it using the steps outlined above.

While practicing self-reflection is vital for addressing linguistic bias on an individual level, more broad-based initiatives are needed to combat its widespread harms. That is why the Lobo Language Acquisition Lab has created a series of expanded trainings and educational modules designed specifically for teachers. Given

their pivotal role in shaping children's attitudes and perspectives from an early age, teachers are uniquely positioned to reduce linguistic bias and promote language diversity within their communities, starting in the classroom.

One such educator-focused initiative was a module developed by lab members David Páez and Naomi Shin for the New Mexico Public Education Department's microcredential for teachers called "New Mexico Education Acts." As of May 2, 2024, 369 educators had completed the microcredential, and another 160 were enrolled.

Our workshops, available in both face-to-face and webinar formats, similarly define and illustrate linguistic bias, including how it impacts children. Participants are invited to imagine how they would respond to different classroom scenarios depicting linguistic bias. Thus far, we have created three versions of the workshop. The first is a general one designed for all types of teachers. The second was developed specifically for Navajo language teachers, and the third was developed for early intervention specialists and teachers who work with deaf and hard of hearing children.

Feedback from workshop participants suggests that our trainings have both short- and long-term impact. There is already evidence that providing training can reduce implicit racial bias (Devine et al., 2012). Thus, we have reason to believe that implementing linguistic bias training is a worthwhile endeavor with long-term impact on teachers and, in turn, on children. By addressing linguistic bias at both the individual and institutional level, we can advance our goal of ensuring greater equity and acceptance for all people, regardless of how they speak, write, or sign.

References

Baugh, J. (2003). Linguistic profiling. In S. Makoni, G. Smitherman, A. F. Ball, & A. Spears (Eds.), *Black linguistics: Language, society, and politics in Africa and the Americas* (pp. 155–168). Routledge.

Baugh, J. (2015). SWB (Speaking while Black). Linguistic profiling and discrimination based on speech as a surrogate for race against speakers of African American Vernacular English. In S. L. Lanehart (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of African American language* (pp. 755–769). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795390.013.68

Baugh, J. (2019). *The significance of linguistic profiling.* TEDxEmory. https://www.ted.com/talks/john_baugh_the_significance_of_linguistic_profiling

Cameron, D. (2015). A response to Naomi Wolf. *Language: A feminist guide*. https://debuk.wordpress.com/2015/07/26/a-response-to-naomi-wolf/

Casillas, L. (Director). (2019). ACLU files suit after 2 Montana women detained for speaking Spanish. In NBC News. https://nbcmontana.com/news/local/aclu-files-suit-after-2-montana-women-detained-for-speaking-spanish

Chin, W. Y. (2010). Linguistic profiling in education: How accent bias denies equal educational opportunities to students of color. *The Scholar: St. Mary's Law Review on Race and Social Justice, 12*(3), 356–384.

Crowl, T. K., & MacGinitie, W. H. (1974). The influence of students' speech characteristics on teachers' evaluations of oral answers. J*ournal of Educational Psychology, 66*(3), 304–308. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036498

Devine, P. G., Forscher, P. S., Austin, A. J., & Cox, W. T. L. (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(6), 1267–1278. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.06.003

Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P. V. Kroskrity, (Ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, polities, and identities.* Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 35-84.

Niedzielski, N., & Preston, D. R. (2009). Folk linguistics. In N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (Eds.), *The new sociolinguistics reader* (pp. 355–373). Bloomsbury.

Player, D. (2023). *LUCKY CHILE in the Land of Enchantment: Mapping Perception of Signed Language Varieties in New Mexico.* MA Thesis, University of New Mexico.

Purnell, T., Idsardi, W., & Baugh, J. (1999). Perceptual and phonetic experiments on American English dialect identification. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 18*(1), 10–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X99018001002

Rickford, J. R., & King, S. (2016). Language and linguistics on trial: Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and other vernacular speakers) in the courtroom and beyond. *Language, 92*(4), 948–988. https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2016.0078

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education, 33*(4), 511–531. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00973770

Shepherd, M. A. (2020). Effects of race/ethnicity, gender, and intonation on secondary science teachers' evaluation of spoken responses. *Urban Education, 55*(5), 730–752. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916660346

Starck, J. G., Riddle, T., Sinclair, S., & Warikoo, N. (2020). Teachers are people too: Examining the racial bias of teachers compared to other American adults. *Educational Researcher, 49*(4), 273–284. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20912758