The Role of Linguists in Social Movements: What Role Does Language Truly Play?

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I.   Introduction

Does the work of linguists trying to address linguistic inequalities actually do anything for those who are linguistically marginalized? It is a provocative, perhaps overly sensationalized question, but it is a discussion worth having nonetheless. When social inequalities run so deep in our society, from issues concerning skin-color, to class, to sexual orientation, to gender expression, to religion, it is worth wondering if a focus on language is missing the forest for the trees. And yet, linguistic prescriptivism has very real, severe impacts upon every single facet of American society. Linguistic discrimination is in many ways a loophole in our anti-discrimination twenty-first century society, running rampant, unchecked. Therefore, it is worth considering whether a movement to address linguistic discrimination and issues surrounding prescriptivist ideologies in America would be of use to other social movements, and whether this would actually help those who are linguistically marginalized. I will ultimately argue that while linguists should be working to educate the national public on issues regarding linguistic discrimination and lingusitic prescriptivism, their work must remain situated within other existing social movements and not stray from linguistic discrimination's roots in racism, sexism, homphobia, classism, and other social issues.

I will begin this paper by detailing the impacts that linguistic prescriptivism has had historically and currently in American society. I will discuss how pervasive linguistic prescriptivism is and how unquestioned it is by the majority of our society. I will also consider how linguistic prescriptivism has reached every crevice of American society, from jobs, to housing, to courts, to education. I will then consider linguistic discrimination as a silent killer in

the twenty-first century, a loophole to anti-discrimination laws. I will ultimately end the paper by considering what the country would look like if the public had more awareness of issues of linguistic discrimination. I will argue that these social movements would not have been dramatically altered if we had educated Americans about linguistic prescriptivism and its harms, but that this is an important tool for social movements.

II.   The Impact of Linguistic Prescriptivism

In this section, I am detailing the impacts that linguistic prescriptivism has had historically as well as currently in American society. Pullum defines prescriptive ideologues as prescribing for others how they ought to write and speak, and condemning the linguistic incorrectness and infelicities of those who do not follow the prescription (2004). In this paper, I am referring to the impacts of linguistic prescriptivism and linguistic discrimination more or less interchangeably, though I do recognize that there are key differences between the two. In this paper, I am simply trying to draw out the effects that linguistic prescriptivism has on our society, and how these effects can manifest as linguistic discrimination that both encompasses linguistic prescriptivism as well as other, more covert, discriminatory forces.

Linguistic prescriptivism is an ideology that most people in our society cannot even put a name to. In fact, chances are people have not heard of it unless they have taken a linguistics class or from another niche (often socially stratified) environment. Of course, people can identify it through lived experience, but not having the language to describe linguistic prescriptivism cannot be understated in regards to how crucial it is in terms of fighting back. Therefore, there is an active movement among linguists to make the public aware of prescriptivism and its effects on society.

It is necessary that I first establish the power that language holds on our society. Language has ultimately always been a powerful tool, with Bourdieu remarking that "Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power" (1977, 648). By this, Bourdieu is signaling how language is active in our society; it is acting in the favor of some, and against others. In *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*, Lippi-Green sends out a call to action to address this dilemma. She asks if we as readers are comfortable with the institutional practices that are forced on individuals in the pursuit of "proper English," stating that if we are not, we must decide, as individuals, what we can do about it (Lippi-Green 2012). This call to action is what grounds the current conversation: something must be done, but what?

While it can feel that in today's age, we are interrogating our language more than ever, it is important to recognize that this interrogation of language has been a constant trend in history, as language is constantly changing to adapt to current societal conceptions. Language has also always been unequal in this country, since its inception. It is necessary to note that racial disparities in the workplace, education, housing, health, law, and other social institutions in the U.S. were reinforced by linguistic differences that are the product of slavery due to involuntary immigration (Baugh 2015). Our institutions are traumatic for many, and acknowledging that and interrogating their histories will help us prepare for a new future. Alim and Smitherman remark on how there is a national firestorm that erupts in the U.S. about once every 20 years over Black language (2012). The Ebonics crisis is an illustrative example of this, in which schools in Oakland in 1996-1997 received national attention based on the language of Black students. The controversy called language education policies into question (Baugh 2015). While Black language had a national platform at the time, the argument ultimately missed the point, which is

that Black language (and the people who speak it) must be systematically recognized. Language has always been along for the ride of the changing social landscape within the U.S.

Today, there is more of an awareness around issues regarding language. However, as antidiscrimination laws continue to get tighter, language and accent have become an acceptable excuse to publicly turn away or refuse to acknowledge the rights of people (Lippi-Green 2012). Eliminating these forms of covert discrimination is exactly why it is important to acknowledge issues of linguistic prescriptivism and discrimination. Linguistic prescriptivism touches upon every facet of our life today, having very real impacts, which I expand on in the next section.

In today's day and age, it is totally fine to have a tournament to find "America's Ugliest Accent" (Fruehwald 2014). Unsurprisingly, this competition really only showed that working class language and non-White language is devalued. Our language ideologies provide a camouflage for discrimination against less powerful social groups (Bucholtz & Zimman 2019). These culturally shared ideas about language and its users play an important role in reproducing social inequalities (Bucholtz & Zimman 2019). It is no coincidence that suburban language, language spoken by White, generally more affluent, more educated populations, is usually preferred (Fruehwald 2014). However, this competition is indicative of the wider issue of the complete lack of knowledge and attention surrounding a movement for linguistic equality that addresses linguistic prescriptivism. It is worth asking what other social characteristic a publication would feel comfortable having an "ugliest ____" competition about, and what this says about how language (accent, dialect, vocabulary choices) is thought of (or not thought of) by society at large.

III.   How Prescriptivism Contributes to Social Issues

As I have established, linguistic prescriptivism has had a large reach in American society. While linguistic prescriptivism has reached almost every facet of American life, in this paper I am focusing on education, the workforce, law, and housing. It is important to contend with the fact that in all of these arenas, there are intersecting issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. While I cannot create a complete picture of all these complicated social issues in such a short amount of space, I hope to illustrate how all-encompassing linguistic prescriptivism has been in American society, and how it discriminates against those who do not speak the standardized variety of speech.

Before I discuss the various institutions separately, I will discuss a few works that consider many various institutions and their intersections, as it is important to highlight the intersective nature of linguistic prescriptivism and its hold on every institution in the U.S. In "Language and Discrimination," Craft et al. (2020) focus on the ways in which questions of justice and equality are linked to issues of language discrimination. Here, Craft et al. theorize social and linguistic cues as being correlated with each other, which is a concept I will continue to refer back to. As I have introduced, Craft et al. point out that no institution that operates in a society with a standard language variety is immune to language discrimination (2020). Therefore, every actor, every institution, every action, and every educational method need to be interrogated.

John Baugh (2015) examines linguistic discrimination in a number of arenas as well, focusing on the issue through the specified lens of Black language discrimination in "SWB (Speaking while Black)." Baugh argues that anyone who lacks fluency in (White) Mainstream American Standard English may be at a considerable disadvantage educationally, economically, occupationally, and at times legally (more on this soon) (2015). Connecting these institutions is

important in terms of understanding the way in which linguistic prescriptivism is ingrained in our society. Linguistic prescriptivism did not just happen to pop up in all of these institutions independently. The institutions themselves depend on each other, with the education system itself having a very obvious ripple effect to the rest of the institutions.

Thus, it is perhaps most apt to begin with schooling when discussing how linguistic prescriptivism permeates throughout our society. The Ebonics controversy that I described above, as well as certain "English only" policies in bilingual education are some immediate examples of linguistic discrimination and prescriptivism operating in schooling (Craft et al. 2020). Schooling is in many ways a tool for socialization, and as we have discussed, linguistic discrimination is intrinsically tied into that process of socialization. Schools are given the task of turning out a productive body of capable, literate citizens (Lippi-Green 2012). To an extent, schools are the arbiters of deciding what capable and literate means, not individually, but systemically. Ultimately, linguistic discrimination acts as de facto discrimination in school settings, disadvantaging the speakers who do not speak White Standard American English. While Lippi-Green (2012) is more concerned with the effects of English-only policies, I wish to expand on her argument to reflect on how these sentiments also pertain to what Englishes schooling values and reinforces. This is the crucial messaging that gets sent to students both young and old in schooling, and that then gets disseminated systematically to the American masses and institutions.

Crucial to the operation of linguistic prescriptivism in schooling is the tie-in of job interviews. The message is clear: yes, we could choose to not be linguistically prescriptive in schooling, but how would that prepare children for the real world? This once again clearly shows the intertwining nature of these institutions and the role linguistic prescriptivism plays. Craft et al

discuss how linguistic discrimination appears in employment through successful interview strategies and the notion of "professionalism" (2020). This prescriptivism continues on the job. Stavans discusses the news anchor Vanessa Ruiz who had to navigate her various identities and balance not only two languages, but two cultures (2015). It became a question of staying true to herself or keeping her job and giving in to the (racialized) language standard. For these instances of workplace linguistic discrimination, Lippi-Green (1994) claims that employers have considerable latitude in matters of language, as the judicial system in practice is often blindly adhering to a standard language ideology.

Indeed, one of the institutions where the harm of linguistic prescriptivism is most apparent and damaging is that of the courtroom, and the law system in general. In "Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and other vernacular speakers) in the courtroom and beyond," John R. Rickford and Sharese King reflect on the discrimination Rachel Jeantel faced as a witness for Trayvon Martin in the case against George Zimmerman (2016). This case illustrates how dangerous linguistic discrimination and linguistic prescriptivism can be. Rachel Jeantel spoke in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and her testimony was dismissed as incomprehensible and not credible; this case in many ways made linguists feel as though language itself was on trial (Rickford & King 2016). Rickford and King establish that speech perception and evaluation are significantly influenced by listeners' attitudes, who are often biased by factors like social status, geography, race, and ethnicity (2016). Linguistic prescriptivism is dangerous, and yet it operates covertly.

While linguistic prescriptivism is always morally wrong, when it gets to the realm of the courtroom, it can become actively dangerous. In "Language, Asylum, and the National Order," Blommaert discusses how language is weaponized and called into question by reflecting on an

African nation-state context. While this example is not rooted in an American context, and as I stated that is the intended purpose of this paper, I still feel as though the reflections in this article regarding the role of language in nation-states is applicable to how language is enforced in the U.S. Languages are situated in a national space, and are in effect a unit of power, control, and institutionalization (Blommaert 2009). The modern-nation state enforces certain imageries of normalcy, with sociolinguistic normalcy being intrinsically tied to this concept (Blommaert 2009). There is an ideal speaker, and thus, there is an ideal language. Ultimately, our legal system both at home and abroad is fraught with linguistic inequities, and this has lived consequences for socially disadvantaged speakers.

The housing market is another realm where linguistic discrimination rears its ugly head. While perhaps not as apparent as the other institutions I have discussed, I felt it was important to include this example as it shows how pervasive linguistic prescriptivism and discrimination are. Baugh (2015) presents some experimental findings that are the result of a collaboration with fair housing agencies across the country that have observed differential treatment of fair housing testers who request appointments to see properties by phone. The study found that non-White callers are far less likely to be granted appointments in affluent communities than White callers (Baugh 2015). The study claims that linguistic profiling restricts access to housing for those who lack fluency in Mainstream American Standard English (Baugh 2015). And yet in the case of this study, the question was how to prove racial discrimination had taken place, sight unseen. The answer is not as easy, and simply points to the necessity of having a movement that addresses linguistic inequities as a way of hopefully annexing this route of discrimination.

IV.   What If Linguistic Prescriptivism Vanished

It is clear that linguistic prescriptivism has a long history in the United States, and that it has crept into nearly every facet of American life, working as an agent of sorts for other discriminatory forces such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism. I use the framing of agent rather than its own category of discrimination because of cases like White European non-native English speakers who do not face discrimination for their accent, and oftentimes even receive prestige for how they sound. The issue is not simply sounding different, but rather it is using sounding different (when compared to the White wealthy male) as a way to target other non-favorable social identities. James Baldwin states, "It is not the Black child's language which is despised: It is his experience" (1979, quoted in Lippi-Green 2012). It is not the language itself, it is the people who speak the language; the language is used as a way to discriminate against them.

Therefore, it is worth reflecting on the fact that addressing linguistic prescriptivism and linguistic discrimination would not solve racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism — far from it. This belief would imply a constructionist view of language, meaning an ideology that suggests that language creates social identities (Bucholtz & Zimman 2019). This is of course not the entire story of how social identities are created, as there are many studies that suggest that our linguistic insights and judgements are often just social judgements mapped onto language, such as the housing study included in Baugh (2015). Therefore, rather than taking a constructionist view when considering the intersections of social issues and language, it is important to take a correlationist view, which attempts to find correlations between social categories and the use of sociolinguistic variants, and analyze linguistic discrimination through this lens (Bucholtz & Zimman 2019). With this view, it is more so a matter of simply considering how language

operates with other social conditions and identifications, which of course will paint a more accurate picture than a model devoid of cultural conditions.

Addressing linguistic discrimination is simply a piece of the puzzle that is addressing discrimination. I would argue that it is a significant piece, crucial in any social movement, whether it be movements against racism, sexism, homophobia, or classism. As we have seen in the Civil Rights Movement to the Ebonics controversy to questions of non-Black speech borrowing from AAVE and the Black Lives Matter Movement, language will ultimately always appear if it is not addressed. Therefore, it is important for social movements to stress linguistic inclusion and help lead the charge of interrogating this important aspect of discriminatory forces. However, it is just as crucial to not lose sight that language is not the crux of the issues. Our focus must always be rooted in helping the speakers who are being linguistically discriminated against, not in a vague notion of language separated from social relevance.

Descrimination is lived, and it is necessary to always stress the identities of those who are currently being linguistically marginalized and trying to better their conditions. So often, it can feel to outsiders as though linguists are interested in languages as scientific objects. However, it is linguists' job to prove that this is untrue by valuing the speakers, rather than the language itself as the be-all and end-all of the situation. As linguists, we need to aid other social movements in the hope that we are helping the linguistically marginalized. The linguistic activism we do must be rooted in this justice-oriented approach. Our activism must be rooted in helping fix the rigged game against the linguistically marginalized, rather than simply teaching them how to play it or explaining that it exists (Alim & Smitherman 2012).

Still, the work of linguists is not in vain. Educating the public on linguistic discrimination's effects does not have to mean that linguists are solving racism, but it does mean

that linguists are annexing a potential discriminatory route and making it more difficult for language to be used as a proxy for attacking other identities. In terms of how we go about addressing this, we need to do better, and take an all-encompassing approach. Alim and Smitherman explain,

> "While most American sociolinguists and teacher educators do a good job showing America's linguistic diversity, they often fail to show how this diversity is linked to America's social inequalities. In other words, most of our suggestions about pedagogy on language attitudes and awareness tend to discuss linguistic stigmatization in terms of individual prejudices rather than as discrimination that is part and parcel of the sociocultural fabric of society" (2012, 186).

This provides the beginnings of a roadmap for how linguists and educators must respond to modern day challenges to address language inequalities. The path forward is indeed for linguists to help fight these discriminatory realities we find ourselves in (Craft et al. 2020). And, linguist or not, all of us can work to address these ideologies within our communities, as ideologies are ultimately reinforced by communities (Craft et al. 2020). Thus, it will take all of us to make hard asks of our community and push for a more just world.

V. Conclusion

This paper has established how prescriptivism is nefarious, and has also tried to make an argument that ending linguistic prescriptivism would not end discrimination for those who are linguistically marginalized. Clearly, prescriptivism is a dark presence, one that has a significant hold on our society and its socialization processes. It touches every institution, and has noticeably harmful effects. The work of linguists to raise these issues is necessary and impactful. And yet, this work cannot be rooted in nothing. It cannot be rooted in simply a linguistic interest,

devoid of social ties. Linguists are only helping if they are helping the actual members of the linguistically marginalized communities. This involves not only interrogating matters of language, but looking at what social factors correlate with sociolinguistic factors, and addressing matters from a social standpoint, first and foremost. Speakers simply speak. Some speakers get disproportionate flack for speaking, and it is our job to not only help them get less flack for their language, but also for their being.

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