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Linguistic Justice, a CFI Read and Dialogue Report Out

by Katie Dredger, Paul Mabrey, and Kristen Kelley

During the spring 2022 semester, nine faculty met three times to discuss April Baker-Bell's 2020 book [Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy](#). This toolbox is an effort on the part of three of us to report about the experience and to invite a wider conversation.

Language matters; we matter through language. Some of our most important memories, connections, and relationships are forged through language. We are linked to our identity, our families, and our culture through language. It is no wonder that our linguistic choices, differences, and framings have driven or intensified some of the recent public controversies within the United States: [Black Lives Matter vs All Lives Matter](#); [Anti-Abortion vs. Abortion Rights](#); [so-called "illegal" immigrants, whether to use gendered language or acknowledge gender pronouns](#), and so much more. Higher education is no exception as language continues to play important roles across learning and teaching, shared governance, and education policy.

Some readers may have experienced the following scenario, while others may need to imagine themselves in the scenario. Think about being a student on the first day of class, a faculty member during your college's faculty welcome, or a new staff hire during onboarding orientation. You are honored to be there, excited to meet new people, and begin the next part of your journey. They call your name to introduce you, but they *butcher* your name. You can sense there was no real effort to try and learn how to pronounce your name. Making it worse, they acknowledge mispronouncing your name, but kind of laugh and that encourages more laughter from the room. You notice some people near you laughing too. While some are laughing, you also sense that some within the room share your disappointment, hurt, and anger. This is an example of linguistic bias, one that can have long-standing impact on those affected and the sense of community at the institution. Briefly, imagine a different scenario. Someone reached out to you to understand how to pronounce your name. They practiced before and confirmed with you the day of the event, transforming this moment into an opportunity to share more about you. This is the first time anyone has wanted to know how to say your name ahead of time, and you feel valued and included. This too can have a long lasting impact; this is an example of linguistic justice.

April Baker-Bell defines linguistic justice as "an anti-racist approach to language and literacy education...It is about dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony and supremacy" (Pg 7). Linguistic racism is essentially an uncritical approach to the spoken and written

word. Linguistic racism can happen when one assumes the [class, education level, or worth of a person when hearing them speak](#) or when reading their writing. It can happen unconsciously and has a negative impact on a person.

As a [predominately white institution](#), JMU has made moves to focus on [racial justice](#). An aspect of racial justice observably missing from the conversation is the consideration of language as an essential part of identity. Unexamined, the assumptions that underlie the expectation of white mainstream English, or formal academic English, provide a ranking structure that stops us short of comprehensive progress toward a more just campus. A person speaking a different English dialect, Black English or with accented English, finds their messages filtered through linguistic biases, even when the speaker holds advanced degrees and esteemed positions. In our academic culture, students find it acceptable and even civilizing to correct the grammar of their professors, and colleagues start sentences with, “what you mean to say is...” rather than listening to the speaker as a respected, competent contributor. These ways of policing language are compounded when further intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class are layered inextricably into the lived experience of our community members.

Our reading group conversations situated us locally in JMU classrooms, offices, and hallways just as they connected us globally through our relationships with students, community members, and even ourselves. As Baker-Bell suggests, reflecting on our own roles and relationships with linguistic bias and justice necessarily entails thinking through how we were raised in and through language, the ways language influenced our own understandings of the world, and how we may continue and interrupt white mainstream English through our current discursive practices. Initially, we all reflected on the various ways we uphold white mainstream English through norms that may not be unique to academia, but are certainly privileged. For example, using white mainstream English standards for proper grammar on papers, in emails, and course materials.

When we reflect on how we may have been taught, we know that we might have witnessed many [assimilationist practices](#), underscoring how critical it is for teachers to break the cycle that can intimidate students. (e.g.,: insisting students say “may I” instead of more informal “can I?”) Here are some of the key reflections we shared about linguistic justice in our teaching and scholarship:

- Listening for content and context is more important than allowing ourselves to be distracted by pedantic rules when listening or reading
- Language variations exist and [students have a right to their own language](#).
- Collaborating with an editor does not diminish the quality of a scholar’s ideas.
- Encouraging students to [communicate with their full linguistic repertoire](#) builds scholarly competence in standard English.

To learn more about Black linguistic justice, we found April Baker-Bell's book [Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy](#) to provide a clear introduction and real-classroom applications and outcomes. To learn more about linguistic justice more broadly for multilingual students in a college setting, a good follow-up is the 2022 text [Linguistic Justice on Campus, Pedagogy and Advocacy for Multilingual Students](#), edited by Brooke Schreiber, Eunjeong Lee, Jennifer T. Johnson, and Norah Famhim. Both are available through the JMU Libraries.

In our final meeting in the spring, those present drafted a syllabus statement to acknowledge our position in the classroom and our stance on language. This is the most recent iteration of our effort:

Language (Syllabus Statement)

Language is powerful and tied to culture and identity. In an attempt to create an inclusive classroom, I consistently interrogate my role in how language is used and valued here. As we move through the course content and assignments, have discussions, and grapple with intellectual tension, I support language dexterity and using one's authentic voice in choosing topics to explore and communicate ideas. I welcome feedback, which may be provided anonymously, through **this survey** [*link to a survey you've created asking for feedback, names optional*] at any time during the semester.

In closing, we invite you to explore other ideas toward a more linguistically just institution. Each of this toolbox's authors along with other members of our [Spring 2022 CFI Read and Dialogue group](#) are building our knowledge and awareness on this topic so that we might become more skillful at subverting our conditioning to privilege white mainstream English. We invite conversation about the tension of perpetuating standards designed to formalize an educated populace and interrogating how those standards gate keep and distract from authentic communication for people whose linguistic repertoire is far larger than the parameters of formal academic English.

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