Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

A Conceptual Approach to Addressing Black Talk in the Writing Center

S. Thomas Wilkes

Introduction

In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) adopted "The Students' Right to their Own Language," a resolution aimed at shifting how the interplay of language, race, ethnicity, and culture was understood in writing instruction (Kynard 360). Rather than acquiescing to the notion that there existed one standard and correct American dialect, the CCCC instead proposed that such a claim was constitutive of one social group's attempt to exert its dominance over another ("Committee on CCCC Language: Background Statement" 3). This idea reflected an evolving understanding on part of the group on how the language patterns of students were associated with their self-concepts (6).

As opposed to highlighting their roles in "fixing" students' language, the CCCC instead affirmed that teachers must have training and experiences that would allow them to become capable of fighting for their students' linguistic rights within the classroom (3). Unpacking this idea is of considerable import for writing centers in that, four decades later, research shows that centers still struggle with implementing pedagogical changes that acknowledge

the validity of students' language patterns while also preparing them to be proficient in the language of the academic and professional mainstream (Bir and Christopher 4; Barron and Grimm 75). I propose that the next step in realizing the CCCC's mission in the writing center is predicated upon establishing tutors as agents capable of confronting linguicism as well as promoting the development of positive self-concept in students.

Black Talk

Over the past several decades, conversation in the composition community has regarded how the home languages of students should be incorporated into the academic space. Progressively, scholars have begun to push for the development of pedagogies geared toward Second Language and Standard English as a Second Dialect learners (Sato 259). One group of students accounted for in this progression are Black Talk speakers.

Here, the term Black Talk is used to signify African American speech's cultural and linguistic independence from English. As Smitherman observes, "The roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the resistance discourse, that was created as a communication system unintelligible to the members of the dominant master class" (3). This unintelligibility originated during the early antebellum period when English and African language patterns were absorbed into one tongue by the enslaved population (6). Commonly, alternative or antithetical semantics were assigned to familiar English words and phrases, giving them altogether new meanings (3). Consequently, Black Talk served as a vehicle through which enslaved Africans could speak back to authority and organize resistance to their oppression

(Baldwin 6). By using this term, as opposed to the more common African American Vernacular English, I hope to better frame the aforementioned conversation on language as one predicated upon culture, identity, and power as opposed to syntactical or grammatical correctness.

Historically, instead of equipping Black Talk speakers with an understanding of how language is associated with power, pedagogical recommendations concerning how to assist them have focused specifically on causing them to recognize when it is or when it is not appropriate for them to use their home language (Howard 265). By focusing exclusively on the what (that language patterns must be modified according to place and context) instead of the why (because extant social factors mandate this), these recommendations often reinscribe the notion that there is indeed one legitimate language of power in the mainstream world.

Self-Concept

The term "self-concept" has been used to refer to an individual's awareness and understanding of their competence, self-worth, and identity (Bong and Clark 141). As a socially constructed phenomenon, it is maintained not only by one's individual self-reflections but also through the comparison of "one's perceived competence and attributes to some known standards and norms" (Bong and Clark 141). In organizational contexts, positive or negative associations can be afforded to certain identities or behaviors in order to have individuals modify their self-concepts accordingly (Rogers et al. 223).

Smitherman coined the term "linguistic push-pull" to refer to how prevailing attitudes toward Black Talk have caused its speakers to modify their self-concept, noting that linguistic push-pull is "Black

folk loving, embracing, using Black Talk, while simultaneously rejecting and hatin on it" (6). In academic contexts, this has been fostered through the use of pedagogies that assert "the superiority of the standard code" by asking that students abandon their home language entirely or that they "master the standard for purposes of upward socioeconomic mobility" (Howard 265). In neither of these cases are Black Talk speakers afforded agency with regard to deciding when they code-switch. Instead, they are instructed to distance themselves from what society determines as the negative aspects of their culture in order to obtain cultural capital (Ladson-Billings 476). As Smitherman's definition demonstrates, this refusal to acknowledge the validity of Black Talk causes its speakers to constantly judge their worth against what is normalized or standardized by the dominant culture. Unfortunately, there persists the promotion of pedagogies that continue to negatively affect the self-concept of Black Talk speakers.

Imagining a Linguistically Pluralistic Writing Center

This issue became increasingly apparent to me while I was serving as a peer tutor in my university's writing center. Across four semesters, I worked with a number of Black Talk speakers who had received feedback from instructors chastising their use of "broken English" in their academic writing. In these sessions, I consistently found myself in a dilemma with regards to how I navigated helping these students fashion their writing into something that would be accepted by their professors while also trying to comfort them in the fact they were still competent communicators. I observed that in the writing center, we, as tutors, are obliged to incorporate strategies into our sessions that

we believe best promote the success of the students that we serve. However, the strategies that we find useful, and our conceptions of what constitutes success, are often not without bias and may unintentionally undermine the agency that the student has in the writing process. In my experience, this has meant that many Black Talk speakers have sat through sessions that stress the importance of Standard English in academic and professional writing but provide very little support to critique the power systems that maintain Standard English as the dominant language used within society. In response to this trend, I suggest the adaptation of a conceptual approach that forefronts the development of critical language awareness in tutor training so that tutors are better prepared to confront linguicism in their sessions while also helping Black Talk speakers develop positive self-concept.

Critical language awareness has been explained as a critical understanding of how language usage and attitudes toward language are derivatives of larger ideological conflicts that are often invested in maintaining linguistic norms, particularly as the result of a linguistically dominant group's desire to maintain said dominance (Alim 28). Proponents of critical language awareness see it as a valuable tool for helping students of linguistically marginalized groups understand how language policy can be used to oppress them (Alim 28). Beyond its development in students, however, researchers have also studied how critical language awareness can be developed in teachers, helping them to see beyond their own linguistic privilege and enabling them to acknowledge systems of power in their teaching (Godley et al. 51). Within the writing center, I see the opportunity for a similar development of critical language awareness in tutors. Ideally, this critical language awareness will be fostered through a renewed attention to embedding the tenets of pluralism

into tutor training, better allowing tutors to navigate the power dynamics inherent in their own sessions while also attending to the development of positive self-concept in the Black Talk speakers they assist.

In language education, pluralism was posited as a paradigmatic response to earlier approaches that "stressed the superiority of the standard code" in language instruction (Howard 265). As opposed to asking that students completely abandon their home languages, or that they passively code-switch in order to adopt the dominant language and its affiliations with heightened social and cultural standing, pluralism instead seeks to encourage the development of critical language awareness in order to allow students to question the inequities inherit in the privileging of the dominant language (Redd and Webb 55). In this way, pluralism challenges linguicism in language and writing instruction by transforming what is commonly understood as a student's struggle with language into a society's misrepresentation of the value of particular languages.

Pluralism has the potential to be an efficacious element in writing center pedagogy because of its focus on challenging linguistic power dynamics. By cultivating a pluralistic approach to addressing language within the writing center, tutors can sustain the self-concept of Black Talk speakers by acknowledging the value of Black Talk while also demonstrating how prevailing attitudes toward language necessitate the ability of Black Talk speakers to code-switch into Standard English. Through this approach, Black Talk speakers can become proficient in Standard English while also gaining the ability to critique the inequities supporting Standard English's privileging in the academic and professional worlds and the clarity to recognize that critiques concerning their own

language usage are reflective of this privileging.

This process allows Black Talk speakers to have agency in regard to how language is negotiated within the sessions that they have in the writing center. In such a case, the assignment being workshopped serves as the visual representation of a dialogic give-and-take led by the student and supported by the tutor. Such an approach can combat linguicism and empower Black Talk speakers when combined with scaffolding that moves toward not only having them become proficient in using Standard English in their writing, but also towardsallowing them to critically analyze the inequities supporting, and stemming from, the normalization of Standard English.

Before any of this can take place, however, tutors must be capable of challenging their own biases and recognizing the value inherent in a multidialectal society. Accordingly, writing center theorists have responded to this issue with a number of varying suggestions. One, best in line with the tenets of pluralism, is that the tutor actively acknowledges "the validity of the tutee's home dialect and culture whenever possible rather than devaluing it" (Bir and Christopher 5). This relatively simple gesture strays away from negatively affecting students' self-concepts while nicely falling in line with the idea that through pluralism students can be taught not only normalized linguistic proficiency but also the ability to challenge these systems of normalization.

Of course, one preliminary step is that tutors familiarize themselves with the varied grammatical and syntactical patterns used by the students within their universities (Bir and Christopher 5). By coming to a more comprehensive understanding of the varied dialects and languages of their student populations, tutors place themselves in a better position to be able to center their sessions around the specific

needs of students and to empathize with how these students' languages are associated with their conceptions of themselves. In this regard, the ability to recognize the linguistic variation surrounding them is an integral component to the development of critical language awareness in tutors.

Tutors cognizant of their own biases, and of the linguistic variation surrounding them, are much more capable of engaging in pluralistic writing center sessions that confront linguicism and promote positive self-concept in Black Talk speakers. In these sessions, code-switching can be promoted as a way to help Black Talk speakers make informed decisions about when to switch between Black Talk and Standard English. Necessarily, this should be accompanied by dialogue that critiques the inequitable distribution of power that privileges Standard English over Black Talk. This aids in the development of positive self-concept in Black Talk speakers by shifting the blame away from them and placing it on unjust social structures and by providing them with the context and vocabulary to eventually resist these structures themselves.

A number of strategies can be taken by tutors to ensure that they are constantly negotiating the distribution of authority within their sessions and that they are working to maximize the agency that Black Talk speakers have in regard to revising their writing. Specifically, with a pluralistic orientation in mind, tutors can encourage code-switching as a way to help Black Talk speakers negotiate when, and why, shifts between Black Talk and Standard English should occur in their academic and professional writing. With an understanding of the features of Black Talk already established, tutors can help point out to students when linguistic patterns emerge in their writing that would appear inconsistent

with the use of Standard English and suggest how these patterns may be revised to reflect that use. In these cases, consent is established between the tutor and student in regard to why changes are being made to the writing, and the student is permitted to see Black Talk and Standard English as two equitable forms of communication that can be used strategically in varying contexts to permit varying forms and levels of access.

In this respect, sessions should be conceived of as dialogues that students and tutors are both engaged participants in (Severino 59). Within these dialogues, the tutor's role can be metaphorized as that of a guide whose place it is to address the expressed needs of Black Talk speakers while ensuring that they become confident in their ability to use Standard English to accomplish their academic and professional goals. Because Standard English is seen as the tool that students must adopt to achieve these goals, assuming a dogmatic view that maligns the desired acquisition of Standard English could be just as problematic as a view that maligns the use of Black Talk (Severino 57). For this reason, it is important for tutors to respond appropriately to the desires or expectations of the Black Talk speakers in their sessions and that they adjust the support that they extend to these students on the basis of these desires. As a function of critical language awareness, this understanding on the part of tutors would acknowledge that extant social norms mandate the use of Standard English for upward social and economic mobility. By helping Black Talk speakers become proficient not only in using Standard English in their writing but also in recognizing what dictates that it should be used, tutors can help Black Talk speakers work toward obtaining that aforementioned upward social and economic mobility while also acknowledging the value of Black Talk.

Additionally, this tutor-student dialogue should be scaffolded in a way that moves Black Talk speakers further along in their abilities to utilize Standard English in academic and professional writing but should also ensure that the recommended changes made to get their writing to this point are collaboratively negotiated. To a great extent, the linguistic distinctions between Black Talk and Standard English can be conceived of as operating on a spectrum, and the student and tutor work together to make changes to the student's writing to move it from one position to the next depending upon context. In this way, the student retains agency in the writing process while also gaining the proficiency to use Standard English in academic and professional contexts, the awareness to comprehend and critique why this is necessary, and ultimately the decision-making ability to choose whether or not this will be done.

Conclusion

Contemporary writing center theory has remarked on the importance of making programmatic and professional decisions within the center that embrace and celebrate diversity as well as challenge extant and unjust conceptions of best practice. Barron and Grimm note that "Because so many writing administrators are white, because the professional organization is predominantly white, most of our programmatic and professional decisions have been based on assumptions informed by white experience that has rarely been challenged" (72). While these decisions may be successful in eliciting desirable traits in composition as they relate to the demonstration of normalized language, they do very little to build the self-concept of Black Talk speakers and may very well work to do the inverse. Resultantly, I have proposed the

embedding of strategies to develop critical language awareness in tutor training in order to demonstrate a first step that writing centers can take toward confronting linguicism and promoting positive self-concept, particularly as it relates to Black Talk speakers. Drawing from pluralism, these strategies are thoroughly invested in increasing the agency with which Black Talk speakers possess in relation to their ability to navigate their own language use, as well as to provide them with a critical understanding of how social norms seek to affect this use.

Ultimately, this essay is submitted with the intention of suggesting that the fostering of critical language awareness in tutor training is a well-needed step toward realizing the CCCC's goal of promoting students' linguistic rights within every corner of the academic space. Ideally, this suggestion will prompt scholarship that empirically examines the best practices of developing critical language awareness in tutoring training, as well as provide writing center tutors and administrators with a few conceptual hooks to address the cultural experiences of their students. As it concerns Black Talk speakers in particular, hopefully this will invite a critical reflection of how decisions made within the writing center concerning training and pedagogy can affect the self-concept of students.

Works Cited and Consulted

"Committee on CCCC Language: Background Statement." College Composition and Communication, vol. 25, no. 3, 1974, pp. 1–18.

Alim, H. Samy. "Critical Language Awareness in the United States: Revisiting Issues and Revising Pedagogies in a Resegregated Society." Educational Researcher, vol. 34, no. 7, 2005, pp. 24–31

Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" The Black Scholar, vol. 27, no. 1, 1997, pp. 5–6.

Ball, Arnetha, and Ted Lardner. African American Literacies Unleashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom. Southern Illinois UP, 2005.

Baugh, John. Out of the Mouths of Slaves: African American Language and Educational Malpractice. U of Texas P, 1999.

Bir, Beth, and Carmen Christopher. "Training Writing Tutors to Recognize Dialectical Difference." The Writing Lab Newsletter, vol. 27, no. 9, 2003, pp. 4–6.

Bong, Mimi, and Richard E. Clark. "Comparison Between Self-Concept and Self-Efficacy in Academic Motivation Research." Educational Psychologist, vol. 34, no. 3, 1999, pp. 139-53.

Godley, Amanda J., et al. "Pre-Service English Language Arts Teachers' Development of Critical Language Awareness for Teaching." Critical Language Awareness Approaches in the Americas: Theoretical Principles, Pedagogical Practices and Distribution of Intellectual Labor, special issue of Linguistics and Education, vol. 32, 2015, pp. 219-69.

Grimm, Nancy M. and Nancy Barron. "Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners." The Writing Center Journal, vol. 22, no. 2, 2002, pp. 55–83.

Howard, Rebecca M. "The Great Wall of African American Vernacular English in the American College Classroom." JAC, vol. 16, no. 2, 1996, pp. 265–83.

Kynard, Carmen. "'I Want to Be African': In Search of a Black Radical Tradition/African-American-Vernacularized Paradigm for 'Students' Right to Their Own Language,' Critical Literacy, and 'Class Politics.'" College English, vol. 69, no. 4, 2007, pp. 360–90.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." American Educational Research Journal, vol. 32, no. 3, 1995, pp. 465–91.

Redd, Teresa, and Karen Webb. A Teacher's Introduction to African American English: What a Writing Teacher Should Know. National Council of Teachers of English, 2005.

Rogers, Kristie M., et al. "Seeing More than Orange: Organizational Respect and Positive Identity Transformation in a Prison Context." Administrative Science Quarterly, vol. 62, no. 2, 2017, pp. 219-69.

Sato, Charlene J. "A Nonstandard Approach to Standard English." TESOL Quarterly, vol. 23, no. 2, 1989, pp. 259–82.

Severino, Carol. "Avoiding Appropriation." ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors, edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2009, pp. 51-65.

Smitherman, Geneva. Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans. Routledge, 2006.