Whiteness as the standard: Shifting ideologies, race, and social context

Introduction

The summer after my first year of graduate school, I taught a beginning-level adult ESOL class at a refugee-serving organization in New York City. One day, we were having a discussion about housing and while describing her apartment, a student said something about her bathroom [bæfrum]. As I had done plenty of other times before in my teaching experience, I quickly corrected her (responding with [bæɵrum]) and the conversation proceeded. But, for some reason, that moment stuck with me. This student was a Black woman from Guinea-Conakry, and I was a white woman from the United States, transplanted from California to New York; what did it mean for me to correct her away from a pronunciation that was common among English speakers in the city, especially Black and African American speakers?

On some level, it is easy to explain what I was doing in that moment: I was correcting my student toward ‘Standard (American) English’. But where did this idea of ‘Standard English’ come from, and how did it end up in my classroom, in my teaching? What ideologies, what histories was I drawing on when I decided if something was ‘standard’ or not, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’? And what vision of the world (and what social order) was I upholding with this vision of English? This paper is part of a larger project that attempts to answer these questions for myself and for my fellow teachers by interrogating what we mean by ‘English’ when we teach ‘English for Speakers of Other Languages’ or ‘English as a Second Language’.

Spending time in other teachers’ classrooms, I observed similar patterns to what I had noticed in my own pedagogical practice. During ethnographic fieldwork at NYC-Org, an adult ESOL program at a multiservice nonprofit organization in New York City, I discovered a
familiar, yet troubling, construct of ‘Standard English’ that was shaped by raciolinguistic ideologies (Swift, 2022). More specifically, linguistic boundaries were established in these classes through the pathologization of forms or practices typically associated with racialized varieties of English (such as African American English or Latinx English), especially final consonant deletion, invariant verb forms in present tense, TH-stopping, and lexical items (like ain’t). This connection was reinforced through teachers’ metalinguistic commentary. Together, this pointed to the continued relevance of race – and particularly, anti-Blackness – in the conceptions of ‘English’ that dominate these classes and others, despite the progressive ideals of teachers and administrators. I became interested in how this racialized conception of English made its way into classrooms in the United States (those that I had observed, and my own) and took hold, in order to better imagine ways of disrupting it.

In a subsequent study, I turned to curriculum used in adult ESOL/English classrooms to explore how this conception of English as the target in adult ESOL classes developed over time (Swift, 2023). Focusing on twelve textbooks used over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, I analyzed metalinguistic and metapragmatic commentary, as well as descriptions of English learners and their communities, within curricular materials to investigate the changing treatment of English within ESOL teaching. Drawing on raciolinguistic genealogy (Anaïs, 2013; Flores, 2021), metapragmatics (Cutler, 2020; Urban, 2006), and the discourse analysis of textbooks, I found that while the linguistic features attended to in the texts remained mostly stable over time, the degree of attention to specific features and the communities they were associated with shifted substantially. Though virtually all the texts included discussion of final sounds, inflectional morphology, and interdental fricatives, much like the teachers and materials at NYC-Org, earlier curriculum had significantly less focus on specific linguistic features, and
instead emphasized the acquisition of vocabulary along with cultural and social practices. Earlier curriculum also explicitly associated ‘nonstandard’ English practices with immigrants and foreigners, in contrast to the classrooms at NYC-Org, where I heard one teacher explain that “there are people who were born here [the United States] and speak English but don’t pronounce it very well”.

Both the shift away from focus on specific grammatical forms and the shift away from describing ‘nonstandard’ usage as a result of foreignness or non-nativeness seemed to occur sometime in the mid-twentieth century, and I was interested in how these discourses about English within adult ESOL connected to larger ideologies about language in the United States, leading to the analysis of historical English language scholarship I present here. I adopt raciolinguistic genealogy as a method to trace changing ideas around ‘English’, particular language features, and language learning within scholarly writing, to understand their development and influence on adult education (Flores, 2021).

In these scholarly texts, I uncover trends similar to the patterns in historical curriculum. As described below, I find that features of ‘nonstandard’ English have remained remarkably consistent in the popular imagination but have been associated with different people and communities over time. Many of the features that were pathologized in the contemporary classrooms I observed and in historical curriculum were also treated negatively in earlier writings about language, but these earlier texts tended to associate them with general colloquial usage rather than racialized or ‘non-native’ varieties. By the mid-20th century, however, these features were routinely identified as African American and/or Black in both academic and popular writing. Based on the dates of these different publications, as well as explicit
commentary in several texts, I propose that this is connected to white backlash to social and demographic change in the mid 20th century, especially the Great Migration of African Americans out of the southern United States. I end with a discussion of how this represents a larger pattern in the relationship between language and race in the United States, and the implications this has for the ESOL classroom.

In discussions around language and race, too often, ‘Standard English’ is framed simply as a collection of linguistic practices that are used by the white elite, and which can therefore be adopted by racialized people in order to succeed in a racist society. A brief look at the history of education in the United States troubles this framing; even after decades of focus on ‘Standard English’ in the classroom, racial inequality and so-called ‘achievement gaps’ remain entrenched. A genealogical lens and close attention to the treatment of linguistic features helps correct this framing, building on work on language ideologies in education to underscore the inadequacy of an approach to language teaching that prioritizes the acquisition of ‘Standard English’. ‘Standard English’ itself is a moving target, and is intrinsically connected to the reproduction of a social order in which racialized people (including immigrants and other English learners) are exploited. By outlining this history, I make clear why traditional practices have not led to social transformation, and show why radical alternatives are necessary within adult ESOL education and other related contexts (García, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2020).

In addition, this project extends work on raciolinguistic ideologies, exploring how the discourses that show up in adult education in the United States, a relatively under-studied context, developed over time. My analysis also builds on work on the historical formation of the
‘standard’ in the United States (Bonfiglio, 2010), adding in new details about the particular relevance of anti-Blackness and societal reactions to the Great Migration.

Conceptual Framework

This analysis starts from the understanding that named languages like ‘English’ or ‘Spanish’ or ‘Arabic’ are social constructs, not discrete natural objects and thus, cannot be described by linguistic criteria alone. While certain linguistic features might cluster together, communicative systems are gradient and overlapping, and clear boundaries are only possible when we invoke social criteria, often drawing on colonial logic (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006; García, 2019). Understanding this social and political dimension of language is key to identifying which structures are upheld by common approaches to language and language learning, and how particular communities are harmed.

In a similar vein, this project is deeply influenced by scholarship on raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017), and the understanding that language and race are colonial constructs which inform each other, and which justify hierarchies of exploitation. As I show in my analysis, race (and, more specifically, anti-Blackness) continues to shape mainstream ideas of ‘acceptable’ language, which is particularly troubling in an educational setting that purports to empower racialized immigrants. With this study, I add to our understanding of how raciolinguistic ideologies manifest in education in the United States by starting with common discourses on an under-studied context (adult ESOL) and moving from classroom ethnography to genealogical analysis.

In my analysis, I adopt a raciolinguistic genealogical lens while drawing on previous scholarship that examines the historical construction of languages and varieties (Irvine & Gal,
2000; Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). Much of this work views the creation and (re-)drawing of linguistic borders as mechanisms of asserting or justifying exploitative power dynamics, and I adopt a similar perspective here. In this sense, I also build on work on enregisterment – that is, the process by which “performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population” (Agha, 2007). More specifically, I extend analyses of linguistic and ethnoracial enregisterment, which explore how broader social dynamics shape how linguistic practices become associated with certain bodies and populations and therefore become socially meaningful (Silverstein 2003; Agha 2005, 2007; Rosa 2019).

Similar to Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 2001), raciolinguistic genealogy as a method is an interdisciplinary approach which examines the relationship between particular texts and wider power structures. A genealogical approach allowed me to relate the content of historical language scholarship to larger social trends like demographic shift, civil rights organizing, and changing social values, with a particular eye toward the intersection between race and language. While Critical Discourse Analysis often focuses on the repetition of specific discourse patterns, like recurring terms or tropes, a genealogical stance adds attention to recurring logics across time, even if they result in superficially different discourses (Smith, 2006). By adopting raciolinguistic genealogy as a method, I was able to both identify the shift in metapragmatic patterns in the scholarship over time, while also recognizing the underlying ideologies which have remained consistent.

My analysis particularly builds on Bonfiglio’s work on Standard American English. Though many have written about standard language ideologies in the United States, Bonfiglio’s work stands out in its attention to historical changes and to discussions of specific linguistic
features. In *Race and the Rise of Standard American* (2011), he offers an especially detailed (and genealogical) analysis of shifting language ideologies in the United States and their relationship to the larger social context. While I focus on a slightly different time period and social context here, I take up his analysis of linguistic enregisterment and how it is shaped by race, and add a new dimension to his account of how ‘standard’ and ‘nonstandard’ English are constructed within the American context.

**Data and Methods**

In order to contextualize the patterns I observed both within contemporary classrooms and historical ESOL curriculum, I began to look to more general writing about English in the United States, as well as curriculum designed for non-immigrant populations, seeking to understand how trends within English teaching might reflect broader currents in language ideologies around variation, dialect, and linguistic normativity. Starting with the reference lists of significant contemporary works on variation in American English and on the history of language attitudes in the United States, I looked through an initial corpus of close to 100 academic and popular texts. I primarily focused on scholarship written in the late 19th century and the first three-quarters of the 20th century, in order to investigate the shift in ideology I had observed in English curriculum during this time, as described above. This preliminary pass was restricted to texts that had been digitized, as this analysis took place during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel and in-personal visits to libraries were not possible. I relied on traditional online academic databases, as well as the Internet Archive, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) Archive, the New York Times Archive, antique and rare bookseller websites, the public archives of several major American city governments, and the help of librarians who scanned articles and books for me.
I narrowed the corpus by looking for explicit discussion about linguistic features, especially those considered ‘improper’, ‘incorrect’, ‘nonstandard’, or otherwise negatively evaluated, as opposed to more general discussion about entire ‘dialects’ or ‘languages’ or linguistic style. This resulted in a corpus of digitized historical texts spanning from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, including:

- *A Vocabulary, or Collection of Words and Phrases which have been Supposed to be Peculiar to the United States of America* (Pickering, 1816)
- *Tarbell’s Lessons in Language* (Tarbell, 1890)
- *Improving Patterns of Language Usage* (Golden, 1960)
- *Problems in Oral English: Kindergarten Through Grade Nine* (Loban, 1966)
- *A Checklist of Significant Features for Discriminating Social Dialects* (McDavid, 1967)
- *On a Note of Protest (In a Minor Key)* (Kaplan, 1969)

The individual texts reviewed in Hess & Maxwell were also included in my analysis.

This corpus was smaller than might be expected, as it included only texts with explicit discussion of discrete linguistic features (that is, syntactic, morphological, and/or phonological/phonetic features, and not just lexical items); the majority of the works initially reviewed included little to none of this kind of scholarly discourse. But it is precisely this kind of talk about linguistic features which fills English classes, and which connects scholarly works to contemporary classroom discourse and historical curriculum. As a result, the corpus is an outline of the ebb and flow of scholarly interest in discrete linguistic features as representations of language, and the gaps in the timeline show that such a conception of English is itself a trend. With this corpus, I offer a sketch of the historical trajectory of a specific type of discourse around
English in the United States that has particular relevance to adult English education, rather than an exhaustive history of American English.

To analyze these texts, I utilized a raciolinguistic genealogical approach (Anaïs, 2013). As described by Flores (2021), raciolinguistic genealogy seeks to situate language ideologies within larger social contexts and within colonial histories, tracing the development of racializing discourses, linguistic categories, and their interrelated nature. While this approach takes a historical view, it looks beyond chronology to understand how different categories and conceptualizations related to race and language developed over time, particularly in connection with settler colonialism.

While analyzing the texts, I looked for explicit discussions of particular linguistic features, especially those that were negatively evaluated (often using metapragmatic labels like ‘nonstandard’, ‘improper’, ‘dialect’, ‘informal’, etc.), as well as descriptions of the users of different features or varieties, either at the individual or community level (Urban, 2006; Johnstone, 2017). I compiled this information in analytic memos focused on individual texts, and employed a recursive and informal axial coding scheme to identify recurring topics/themes and shifts over time. These topics – including categories of linguistic features, discussion of social groups, positive and negative evaluations, and references to historical context/events – were then considered together against the backdrop of a larger social timeline, to uncover trends across time, as described below.

Findings

‘Nonstandard’ English and its speakers

As I read work that spanned decades, I observed a consistency in which features or patterns were labeled as ‘nonstandard’ (or otherwise received negative judgment), including the
word *ain’t*, multiple negation, regularized agreement (using one verb form for all subjects), final deletion, TH variation ([t], [d], [f], or [v] where other varieties have [θ] or [ð]), and η fronting ([n] where other varieties have [ŋ]). Of course, these features are labeled as ‘nonstandard’ by many contemporary linguists – associated with some, but not all, dialects of American English, often those used within stigmatized or oppressed communities. And, notably, many of these are also the forms and patterns that received extra attention in the classes I observed during my fieldwork.

The continued preoccupation with these forms as ‘bad’ or ‘nonstandard’ over the course of generations underscores the social construction of ‘standard English’. Prescriptive grammarians often justify the superiority of ‘standard’ language forms by claiming that such forms are older, or the most widely used, but looking at these historical works, it’s clear that ‘nonstandard’ forms like *ain’t* are just as old, and they are considered ‘vulgar’ precisely because they are in common usage. Instead, these language hierarchies are continually justified by the association of certain forms with certain communities, with social inequality and linguistic inequality reinforcing each other, an implicit social process which can become explicit in the metapragmatic commentary in language scholarship.

But these historical texts show that even this process of enregisterment is not as straightforward as it might seem. While the ‘nonstandard’ forms themselves are consistent, the communities they are associated with are not. As I describe below, while earlier texts connect ‘nonstandard English’ with groups that are lower class, rural, and more ‘informal’, over time, it becomes an increasingly racialized construct.

In earlier writing, these ‘nonstandard’ features were linked to rural communities and a lack of education, and were associated with so-called ‘informal’ speech, ideologies which seem
to have been long entrenched in England and subsequently maintained in the United States. In *A Vocabulary, or Collection of Words and Phrases which have been Supposed to be Peculiar to the United States of America*, for example *an’t* (a correlate of *ain’t*) is described as a “vulgarism” that is surprisingly used by “some persons of education and character” in speech, but never in writing, indicating that it was in common use but nevertheless associated with ‘ignorance’ and ‘informality’ (Pickering, 1816, p. 33). Similarly, invariant *be* – distinct in usage from habitual *be* associated with African American Language (Zanuttini and Martin, 2017) – is connected to “provincial dialects of England”, as well as the “interior towns” and “the vulgar” of New England (p. 46, italics in original).

These evaluations of ‘nonstandard’ features continued into the turn of the century (that is, the late 19th and early 20th centuries). Tarbell’s *Lessons in Language* (1890), an English textbook aimed at so-called ‘native speakers’, for example, frames non-target forms as common, but incorrect, seemingly connected to informality or lower education levels. This is especially evident in a note on “negative forms”, which are described as “so common” and exceedingly familiar, unlike the rarely heard “correct forms”:

Example 1, page 219:

No other errors of speech are so common as those which occur in the use of negative forms. Such exercises as those given will tend to familiarize the ears and tongues of pupils with correct forms, which many of them rarely hear.

Other lessons addressed vocabulary, including “words to be distinguished” (such as *may* versus *can* and *have* versus *get*) and the usual offender *ain’t*, in addition to the pronunciation of final sounds, including NG ([ŋ] not [n]) and voicing distinctions, as in Lesson 93:

Example 2, page 72:

LESSON 93. – EXERCISE
**PRONUNCIATION.**

Pronounce distinctly the final consonant in the following words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ballad</th>
<th>ballot</th>
<th>need</th>
<th>neat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bead</td>
<td>beet</td>
<td>ride</td>
<td>right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feed</td>
<td>feet</td>
<td>sighed</td>
<td>sight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heed</td>
<td>heat</td>
<td>seed</td>
<td>seat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hide</td>
<td>height</td>
<td>tied</td>
<td>tight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The text also devotes substantial space to practicing verb conjugations, particularly the distinction between the third person and other forms, including warnings that are similar to those observed during my fieldwork: “CAUTION. – Never say, “You was.” You *is* always used as though it meant more than one. Say “you were.”” (p. 110, italics in original)

H. L. Mencken’s widely cited work *The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (1919) displays similar patterns. Though Mencken was not a trained linguist, and this work lacks a thorough methodology, it remains a highly influential example of early American English dialectology. Many of the same features appear – including multiple negation, *ain’t*, and variation in verbal morphology – and Mencken describes them as widespread and not necessarily linked to any particular region or social group. On the contrary, these dialectal features “sweep the whole country” and are heard “everywhere”, “from coast to coast”:

Example 3, page 293:

The incessant neologisms of the national dialect sweep the whole country almost instantly, and the iconoclastic changes which its popular spoken form is constantly undergoing show themselves from coast to coast. “He hurt *hisself*,” cited by Dr. Charters, is surely anything but a Missouri localism; one hears it everywhere. And so, too, one hears “she invited *him* and I,” and “it hurt *terrible*,” and “*I set* there,” and “this *here* man,” and “no I *never, neither*,” and “he *ain’t* here,” and “where is he *at*?” and “it seems
like I remember,” and “if I was you,” and “us fellows,” and “he give her hell. And “he
taken and kissed her,” and “he loaned me a dollar,” and “the man was found two dollars,”
and “the bee stang him,” and “I wouldda thought”, and “can I have one?” and “he got
hissn,” and “the boss left him off,” and “the baby et the soap,” and “them are the kind I
like,” and “he don’t care,” and “no one has their ticket,” and “how is the folks?” and “if
you would of gotten in the car you could of rode down.

(Italics in original)

At several other points in the book, he also offers examples of widespread final consonant
deletion, but with this feature, his description of its usage and origin gets a bit murkier. When
discussing the reduction of ND clusters, for example, Mencken declares it to be characteristic of
virtually all American English speakers, but also proposes that it derives from Southern
American varieties, which in turn are influenced by (pathologized) African American speech:

Example 4, page 137:

We relieve rind of its final d, we begin to neglect the d in landlady, handsome, grandmother, etc., and in the complete sentence, we slaughter consonants by assimilation.

I have heard Englishmen say brand-new, but on American lips it is almost invariably bran-
new. So nearly universal is this nasalization in the United States that certain American
lexicographers have sought to found the term upon bran and not upon brand. Here the
national speech is powerfully influenced by Southern dialectal variations, which in turn
probably derive partly from the linguistic limitations of the negro. The latter, even after
two hundred years, has great difficulties with our consonants, and often drops them.

(Italics in original)

Here, we see a repetition of similar sentiments from earlier work, with negative terms like
“slaughter”, “linguistic limitations”, and “difficulties” indicating that widespread usage is nevertheless inferior, but the potential explanation for such inferiority is shifting, from associations with rural or ‘uneducated’ communities to connections with a particular region and a particular racialized population. Further, this feature is explicitly evaluated as resulting from linguistic incompetence and incomplete acquisition, rather than general dialectal variation. Despite Mencken’s assertion that most Americans use this feature, it is becoming enregistered with specific stigmatized groups, and iconic of their natural (racial) inferiority (Irvine & Gal, 2000).

This ambiguity continues into the mid-twentieth century; within writings about language, we see the same ‘nonstandard’ features, which are sometimes linked to lower-class or rural communities, but are increasingly linked to race, and especially Blackness in later writings. McDavid’s A Checklist of Significant Features for Discriminating Social Dialects (first published in 1967, but reprinted several times in materials aimed at teachers) is an example of the former. The work details many familiar ‘nonstandard’ features to watch out for, including TH variation:

Example 5, page 67:
1. The distinction between /ɵ/ as in thin and /t/ in tin, /f/ in fin, /s/ in sin.
2. The similar distinction between /ð/ in them and /d/, /v/, /z/.

and variation in verbal morphology:

Example 6, page 68:
“15. Unorthodox person-number concord of the present of to be. This may be manifest in generalizing of am or is or are, or in the use of be with all persons, singular and plural.
16. Unorthodox person-number concord of the past of be: I were, he were; we was, they was.
17. Failure to maintain person-number concord of the present indicative of other verbs: I does, he do (This is perhaps the most widely recognized diagnostic feature.) Note that three third-person singular forms of common verbs are irregular, has, does /d^z/, says /sez/. In the last two the spelling conceals the irregularity, but many speakers who are learning this inflection will produce /duz/ and /sez/. The form bees is also
18. Omission of the /-ŋ/ of the present participle: He was open a can of beer. (3)
   Note that before a word beginning with a consonant the /-d/ may be omitted in speech in I
   burned my pants. Those who normally have this contextual loss of the sound may need to
   learn the special conventions of writing.
   Note also that the loss of the inflection extends to those verbs that form the past tense and
   past participle irregularly.
20. Omission of /-t,-d,-əd/ of the past participle.
21. Omission of the verb to be in statements before a predicate nominative: He a good
    boy.
22. Omission of to be in statement before adjectives: They ready.
23. Omission of to be in statements before present participles: I going with you.

McDavid, however, takes care to explicitly state that the use of these features does not fall along
racial lines, but is connected to “folk” usage, emphasizing that they are socially marked
(presumably relating to class or the urban/rural binary) but not racialized, clarifying that “none of
them is exclusively identified with any racial group”:

Example 7, page 68:

The origins of these features are of indirect concern here; that they are of social
significance is what concerns us. In general, however, it is clear that most of them may be
traced back to the folk speech of English, and that in the United States none of them is
exclusively identified with any racial group, though in any given community some of
them may be relatively more frequent among whites or among Negroes.

Other scholarly writing around this time, however, documents shifting evaluations of
‘nonstandard’ language in the United States. For example, two years later, an essay in College
English recounted the connection between race and ‘standard English’ as a prominent theme in
discussions at the 1968 annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (Kaplan,
1969). Kaplan, a participant at the conference, disagreed with this understanding, insisting,
similar to McDavid, that “‘nonstandard’ dialect, by definition, represents an economically not a
racial based problem”, though his interest in adding to the conversation he observed at the annual meeting points to the increased academic attention to race and ‘English’ at the time.

By this point, however, Kaplan’s appears to be an unpopular point of view, with ‘nonstandard’ English increasing linked to Blackness. This shift is perhaps most striking in a supplement to The American Language Mencken published in 1948, about two decades after the original work cited above. While in 1919, Mencken describes variation in verbal morphology, as in the examples “he give her hell” or “he don’t care” (293, see Example 3 above), as widely used throughout the United States, by 1948, he asserts that this “confusion of persons” is only found in the speech of African Americans in very particular regions, and almost never in the speech of white people:

Example 8, page 264:

But its vestiges are also to be found in the speech of the most ignorant Negroes of the inland regions, which still shows grammatical peculiarities seldom encountered in white Southern speech, however lowly, e.g., the confusion of persons as in “I is” “Do she?,’” “Does you?,” “Am you de man” and “He am”…

Investigating the accuracy of this description is beyond the scope of this paper – I will leave that to the historical linguists1 – but regardless of how well Mencken’s work reflects actual usage, the shift from 1919 to 1948 is quite radical, especially since there is no trace of shock or surprise in his writing. Instead, Mencken offers both descriptions matter-of-factly, indicating that they were each somewhat representative of dominant narratives around ‘nonstandard’ English in their respective time periods.

Similar evaluations are evident in other prominent scholarship from the mid-twentieth

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1 See Rickford (1999) for a discussion of the linguistic features and development of African American English.
century, particularly in the 1960s. During this decade, there is an explosion in writing about ‘nonstandard’ English, with race becoming an increasingly important theme. While William Labov’s writing from the early 1970s on African American English is perhaps the most well-known scholarship on this topic (and has received its own critical reassessment; see Cheshire, 2018), it in fact was preceded by a wave of earlier research that helped cement the connection between race and language, especially within education. For example, Golden’s *Improving Patterns of Language Usage* from 1960 addresses the emerging ‘problem’ of nonstandard practices in schools, depicting it as an explicitly racialized issue that had been under-researched up to that point (24-25). While Golden links this ‘problem’ to migration from the southern United States into northern cities (more on that below), regional difference is not a real issue, as certain “pleasing characteristics of Southern speech” are framed as “interesting as well as acceptable” (21). And unlike earlier writing, education levels or class differences are also somewhat irrelevant in this discussion of linguistic variation; in a passage which echoes comments heard from during my fieldwork, Golden notes that these ‘nonstandard’ practices are particularly linked to African Americans, regardless of their place of birth or their education:

Example 9, page 13:

An engineer asked, “Why it is that all of my men are high school graduates, and all of them were born in Detroit, but when they’re working together, they speak a different language? … I’m interested because I am one of the first engineers to place Negroes in responsible jobs paying $3.17 an hour. If they know better, I’m going to tell them that as long as they work for me, they must speak standard English.”

According to Golden’s research within Michigan schools, this problematic ‘nonstandard’

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2 Some of Labov’s earlier, less famous work, is reviewed in Hess & Maxwell (1969), analyzed below
English (uniquely spoken by African Americans) is characterized by the same classic set of features that we have observed throughout discourse about ‘nonstandard’ language, including variation in verbal morphology, final sound deletion, and TH variation:

Example 10, pages 19-20:

This second language, mainly of good English origin but now containing archaic expressions which are said to have been leveled out of American white speech, is characterized by an almost complete reversal of the standard practice of agreement in number between the subject and the verb; e.g. he do, she have, they is. Other verb troubles involve omission of the auxiliary and confusion of tenses. Many students may be said to add the sound of the letter s to a word, as in the pronoun mine (mines), and to leave it off where it belongs, as in ten cents (ten cent). There is also excessive use of be, as in the expression He don’t be here. Thus, besides the frequent substitution of the sound of d for th at the beginning, and that of f for th at the end of words and substitutions of the vowel a for the diphthong i to make right sound like rat, most of these language difficulties are grammatical. There is also an excessive rise in pitch which some authorities believe to be the key pattern change.

(Italics in original)

Golden also makes clear that this is not just an issue of informality or lack of prescriptive schooling; while some nonstandard expressions appear in all students’ speech, based on her own experience in the classroom, she insists that the issue with African American migrants’ language is of a different order. Their linguistic practices were especially “strange”, if not completely

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3 In Golden’s writing, we can see some of the language ideologies which would emerge in the now-infamous ‘Ann Arbor case’ twenty years later. Black families in Michigan argued their children were being denied an equal education because of economic and cultural discrimination; the judge (and the general public), however, focused more specifically on ignorance around Black English and its legitimacy as a language variety. Ultimately, the case
Example 11, page 12:

When I began this study, I had taught for twelve years in three of these Detroit schools, and prior to that, twelve years in other Michigan schools where I had no contact with Negro children or with others who used the same types of nonstandard expressions. The unacceptable expressions used in speaking and writing by some of the students in these Michigan schools were of a general mixture of linguistic categories familiar to English teachers everywhere: ain’t, I seen, I done, have ran, have came, this here, that there, would of, and you was. In my first teaching experience in Detroit, I had difficulty understanding many of the pupils during the first few days, for, added to the above locutions were many strange ones.

Loban’s Problems in Oral English (1966), a National Council of Teachers of English research report which focused on elementary and middle school students in Oakland, outlines a similar racialized divide. In the concluding section of the report, the African American students in the study are depicted as speaking a ‘nonstandard’ English which is characterized by “difficulties with verbs” at its core, including patterns like:

Example 13, page 49:

lack of agreement of subject and verb, third person singular (other than forms of the verb to be), omission of auxiliary verbs (especially those formed from the verb to be), inconsistency in the use of tense, nonstandard use of verb forms, lack of agreement of subject and verb while using forms of the verb to be

regenited the national conversation around Black language practices but fell short of providing legal protection for language rights (Fiske, 1981).
Though the study does not investigate what it determines to be “articulation” features, this section nevertheless lists some as additional features of African American speech, including, of course, TH variation and final deletion (and insertion):

Example 14, page 58:

Although this study has not been concerned with clear articulation of speech, one matter should be noted as a subject for future study. Anyone listening to the oral language of the Negro subjects would agree that many word endings and beginnings are missing in Negro dialect. These subjects are also uncertain when to use an s to end a verb and when not to use it, as in the following:

My mother look at television a lot.

We likes to ride our bikes in the park.

They tend to omit the required s on the third person singular verb and to add a superfluous s to verbs which agree with subjects not requiring an s to end the verb. They also confuse a and an, sometime and sometimes, and the phonemes d, t, and th. They have not acquired all the phonemes of standard English and do not, apparently, hear any difference between phonemes they use in nonstandard fashion and the corresponding phonemes in standard speech.

Looking beyond these ‘results’, however, the importance of race in this depiction of ‘nonstandard’ English becomes even clearer. Earlier in the report, in the discussion of methodology, Loban explains that the study compares three groups, categorized according to average ratings provided by teachers: Caucasian (High Language Proficiency), Caucasian (Low Language Proficiency), Negro (Low Language Proficiency); Negro/African American students rated ‘high’ were excluded from the study, meaning that even within the research design, African
American language was framed as inherently ‘nonstandard’ and any information which did not support this framing was erased (Irvine & Gal, 2000). This is underscored when Loban notes that the Caucasian/white participants actually do follow several of the patterns described as nonstandard and exclusively African American, but insists that this is a different phenomenon, echoing Golden’s distinction between ‘normal’ variation and the especially nonstandard nature of African American speech:

Example 15, page 47:

It is immediately apparent that all these problems transcend usage. They are matters of sensitivity to clarity and precision of communication rather than problems of habit or usage.

And while the study focused on African American students, Loban linked their language practices to a more generally racialized view of language, suggesting that “the results lead one to believe that a similar complicated set of problems would be revealed for many Oriental, Hawaiian (Pidgin), Spanish-speaking, Cajun, and Appalachian subjects” (49). Here, an understanding of ‘nonstandard’ English as a racialized (and particularly Black) construct crystallizes.

This association was undeniably widespread by the end of the decade, evident in a literature review on “nonstandard dialects” commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education in 1969 (Hess & Maxwell); I included the report, as well as the 46 studies it reviews, in my analysis, though because of space constraints, I will focus on discourse within the report and general trends in the individual studies. While the report itself is somewhat hesitant to attach ‘nonstandard’ English to a particular community, discussing the impacts of race, class, region,
and education on dialectal variation, its reference list paints a less nuanced picture. For example, out of its 46 “Selected References on Nonstandard Dialects” (almost all from the preceding decade)\(^4\), over half (24/46) explicitly present ‘nonstandard’ English as a primarily Black/African American phenomenon, with an additional 10 linking ‘nonstandard’ English with urban populations, generally described as consisting of African Americans and poor whites. In sharp contrast to earlier writings about ‘nonstandard’ English, less than ten percent (4 out of 46) framed ‘nonstandard’ English as primarily a class issue. And virtually none of the works referenced presented it as a regional issue, *except* when referencing Black (and to a much lesser degree, lower class white) migration from the southern United States into northern cities.

These racialized framings of ‘nonstandard’ English only solidify in later years, influencing scholarly work and even popular writing about language. Looking through the New York Times archive, for example, reveals a similar trajectory when systematically searching for references to the linguistic features, dialects, and speaker groups discussed in the historical scholarship, as well as more general evaluative discussion about language (using phrases like ‘bad English’ or ‘grammatically incorrect’). While earlier reporting and opinion pieces focused on the apparent differences between British and American English, or regional variation in the United States, articles from the second half of the twentieth century overwhelming linked ‘nonstandard’ English to Black/African American communities and urban public schools, with headlines like:

**LANGUAGE CLINIC TO HELP NEGROES; Goal Is to Blend Standard and Regional**

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\(^4\) It should be noted that these works differ in their stance toward ‘nonstandard’ English in general and the linguistic practices of African Americans in particular. While some take an explicitly eradicationist and anti-Black position, some (including foundational studies by respected linguists like William Labov and Walt Wolfram) do argue for the legitimacy of Black English. Even these more positive depictions of Black language, however, consistently frame it as ‘nonstandard’, deviating from an imagined white, middle-class norm, and place a level of scrutiny on Black language practices (while ignoring larger structures of white supremacy) that has been problematized by radical scholars, as noted below.
English (1965)

Brooklyn College Course on ‘Black English’ Designed to Help Students Learn Standard English (1971)

Help Ordered for Pupils Talking ‘Black English’ (1979)

STUDY FINDS BLACKS' ENGLISH INCREASINGLY DIFFERENT (1985)

WHY BLACK ENGLISH DOESN'T ADD UP (1987)


Though this writing continues to some degree into the twenty-first century, it reaches something of an apex in 1996 and 1997 with coverage on the so-called ‘Ebonics controversy’ in Oakland; by this point, the connection between ‘nonstandard’ English and Blackness was firmly entrenched in the popular imagination.

Language ideologies in context: ‘Nonstandard’ English and the Great Migration

Together, this array of historical texts shows how ‘nonstandard’ English (and, accordingly, ‘standard’ English too) became an increasingly racialized construct over time in the United States. While individual linguistic features are consistently labeled as ‘nonstandard’, they are attached to different identities and populations depending on the time period, reflecting a shifting enregisterment. By the mid-twentieth century, and extending into the contemporary moment, ‘nonstandard’ English in the United States was deeply linked with Blackness.

As I looked through these texts, I was not surprised to find linguistic anti-Blackness – the stigmatization of language practices associated with Black and African American communities is well-documented – but I was surprised that it seemed to manifest in a specific way at such a particular period of time. And I was also somewhat confused about why this understanding of ‘standard’ English seemed so present in contemporary adult ESOL classes, like those I observed
at NYC-Org; I had expected xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, but not such a high
degree of preoccupation with so-called ‘native’ speakers’ variation.

This is where raciolinguistic genealogy became particularly helpful, allowing me to bring
history into the analysis without relying on static categories or symbols (Anaïs, 2013). In
addition to looking for recurring discursive patterns – such as repeated tropes or metaphors – I
searched for the continuity of logics, which might manifest variably in relationship to particular
historical moments or contexts (Smith, 2006). Looking at the wider social context, including that
described within the texts themselves, illuminated some of the consistent ideological forces
behind this apparently shifting understanding of language and underscored the role of ‘standard’
language norms in maintaining societal (and especially racial) hierarchies in the United States.

Though a range of historical events and phenomena certainly shaped these texts, one in
particular came up again and again: the Great Migration. The Great Migration was perhaps the
most significant mass migration and demographic shift in the history of the United States; from
about 1916 to 1970, millions of African Americans migrated out of the rural south into urban
areas in the northeastern, midwestern, and western states, fleeing Jim Crow segregation and
racialized violence to seek work in industrializing cities (Wilkerson, 2011). Though the linguistic
legacy of the Great Migration on African American English has been discussed (Farrington,
King, & Kohn, 2021; Mufwene, 2015; Wolfram, Hutchison, & Cullinan, 2017), little work has
explored its impact on general language ideologies in the United States. The historical texts I
analyzed, however, point to the Great Migration – and, more importantly, the reactionary racism
from white Americans and mainstream institutions to this demographic shift and other social
changes (Sugrue, 1996) – as hugely influential on the development of modern conceptions of
‘standard’ and ‘nonstandard’ American English, and norms of ‘good English’ more broadly.
The demographic shift of the Great Migration intersected with significant political and social changes within the United States. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, sustained civil rights organizing and subsequent legislation led to substantial gains in racial justice, especially the legal protection of African Americans, from the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to the Civil Rights Acts of 1968. This period saw a surge in African American and interracial activism, in the form of both organized movements led by groups such as the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and more spontaneous demonstrations, like the so-called ‘ghetto riots’ of the sixties. As a result, the white supremacist backlash which manifested throughout the United States in the mid-twentieth century in the form of lynching, white flight, and regressive policy (and which surfaces in these texts on language) is a reaction to not just population shifts, but also to coalitional organizing and threats to the established racial order, particularly from Black-led organizing and social movements. In this way, white anxieties around the Great Migration (and how they manifest as a preoccupation with language and Blackness) can be understood to represent broader apprehension about the civil rights movement, which itself foregrounded race and Blackness.

Not only does the timing of the shift in evaluation of ‘nonstandard’ English in the mid-20th century align with the Great Migration, the texts themselves make repeated reference to it. Some of these references are somewhat subtle. Kaplan (1969), for example, describes the increased focus on Blackness in discussions of ‘nonstandard’ English as a sort of accidental confusion or distraction, more reflective of local social tensions than actual linguistic reality. Though he doesn’t explicitly reference African American migration, he presents the focus on Black English as ‘nonstandard’ as a preoccupation of northern cities:

In a society in conflict, where sides are fairly clearly drawn, there seems to be a tendency
to identify “nonstandard” dialect with “nonstandard” behavior; that is, with a segment of the population which can be clearly labeled. Because the conference met in a northern city, the logical step of identifying “nonstandard” dialect with Black society appeared to be an easy one. (Had the conference met in the southwest, it would have been equally logical to attach the identity to the Mexican-American society.)

Other texts, however, made more overt references to the Great Migration, like *What to Do about Nonstandard Dialects* (Hess & Maxwell, 1969), published in the same year. As described above, the majority of the articles and reports cited in the review tied ‘nonstandard’ English specifically to urban Black populations, with many making explicit reference to African American migrants.

Golden’s (1960) discussion of the linguistic ramifications of the Great Migration is especially elaborate. Early on in the report, Golden makes repeated explicit references to the “rapid migration of workers from rural Southern areas to Northern industrial cities” as the underlying cause for Detroit’s ‘language problem’:

Because of the rapid migration of workers from rural Southern areas to Northern industrial cities where they have come for social and economic betterment, he may find in his classroom, as I did in Detroit, a great many students, particularly Negro students of a low socio-economic level, who habitually use a pattern of speech containing so many nonstandard usages, reflecting all four types of speech differences, that their language seems unacceptable as good high-school-level speech in the new area. The pattern of speech may not only hinder the users socially and vocationally, but may give a false impression of ignorance and lend support to prejudice. (7)

One needs only to look at the population figures to gain some insight into the social
aspects of the problem. The rapid expansion of the automobile and allied industries attracted a sudden and continued migration of workers, both white and Negro, to the Detroit area. They came, and are still coming, from all parts of the country, but especially from the South. T. J. Woofter stated in 1933 that as soon as immigration was restricted, the vacuum thus created drew hundreds of thousands of Southern Negroes to the cities, and shifted 20 per cent of the Negro children of school age in the South to city schools.

(10)

Golden also emphasizes the racial dimensions of this ‘problem’, and makes clear that it is not just a mismatch between different regional varieties; white people migrated too, but this is a particularly Black issue:

Although both Negroes and whites bring to Detroit similar characteristics of speech, the whites, because they have entrée to city white society on all its various cultural levels, tend to be more readily assimilated and may sooner drop unusual characteristics of speech. Many Negroes, forced into crowded areas, and perhaps preferring their “city-within-a city,” in many cases are simply transported from a Southern neighborhood to a Northern one with no greater contact with white people and with very little contact with cultured Negroes. (11)

In contrast, Golden portrays (white) Midwestern speech as especially ‘standard’:

It suggests change. It says one level of usage is better than another because it is more generally acceptable. It honors the fact that our language is acceptable because we were lucky enough to be born in the Midwest, and Midwestern dialect in its standard form fortunately is one of the most widely used and most acceptable varieties of English in the United States. It implies to many of our students that we were born into a different social,
economic, and cultural level than they and that they must change if they wish to fit into the general cultural pattern of our particular area. (8-9)

Without the earlier context, it could be easy to take these descriptions more or less at their face value. The Great Migration was a huge demographic shift, and perhaps the sudden meeting of disparate regional and racial/ethnic varieties did cause substantial challenges in communication and education. Looking at the historical scope of language scholarship, however, this account becomes untenable; these midcentury texts (and the later texts that draw on them) tell a story about ‘nonstandard’ English that just does not make sense from a purely linguistic point of view. These writings are sounding alarms about language features that, in fact, were not new to these places, nor were they unfamiliar to the average white American. Earlier works of dialect description affirm that at least some of these ‘nonstandard’ features were widespread, and curriculum and educational scholarship portray them as long-standing ‘problems’ for white students. The anxiety that motivates the writing during this era, and which continues to shape contemporary discourse about ‘standard’ English, is about more than just language.

Here, we see the white listening subject at work. Drawing on Inoue (2003a, 2003b, 2006), Rosa and Flores (2017) describe how the perception of linguistic practices is not just an individual physical experience of hearing or seeing signs and interpreting their meaning, but also a social process that is shaped by (and reinforces) ideas of race and racial hierarchy. The ‘white listening subject’ is a structural position occupied by hegemonic institutions (and individuals asserting hegemonic power) who engage in this process of variably perceiving and evaluating linguistic features depending on who they are produced by and their place in the racial order.

Within this process, certain features are selectively perceived as especially problematic when linked with racialized people (and the actual variation within the linguistic practices of
white people is erased or ignored), leading to the apparently contradictory evaluations evident in
the historical scholarship analyzed above. This can happen over time; over the course of the
twentieth century, we can observe so-called ‘nonstandard’ features like ain’t, multiple negation,
regularized agreement, final deletion, TH variation, and ñ fronting becoming reevaluated as both
particular to people of color, and particularly deviant.

But this contradictory evaluation can also occur synchronically; the same “listening
subjects” can hear the same features in different ways, even within the same contemporary
moment. For example, as described above, Golden (1960) notes that it was common for her
(white) students in non-urban parts of Michigan to use “unacceptable expressions”, including “a
general mixture of linguistic categories familiar to English teachers everywhere: ain’t, I seen, I
done, have ran, have came, this here, that there, would of, and you was” (12); this variation was
undesirable but normal. She characterizes the language of Black students in Detroit, on the other
hand, as having a completely different (and significantly more problematic) type of
‘nonstandardness’5, including many “strange” features in addition to those she observed among
her previous students (12). A few pages later, she describes the features of this so-called Black
dialect, including the “almost complete reversal of the standard practice of agreement in number
between the subject and the verb; e.g. he do, she have, they is” (19). This usage appears to be
equivalent to her white students’ use of “you was”, but is heard as unique and especially
pathological when associated with urban Black students (Flores and Rosa, 2015).

Loban (1966) engages in similar acrobatics of reasoning when comparing the language of
white and Black speakers. As noted above, while he admits that even ‘standard’ speakers (which,

5 This exoticization of the language of Black Americans is reminiscent of what DeGraff calls Creole exceptionalism
(2003): the linguistic practices of colonized people are framed as necessarily a deviation from the European
standard, and as uniquely structurally deficient.
significantly, he defined as inherently white) have “difficulties” with language, including “inconsistency in the use of tense”, “careless omission of words”, “lack of syntactic clarity”, “confusing use of pronouns”, and “trouble with agreement of subject and verb”, he insists that this is a different issue (47). Though both the “Standard English” and the “social class dialect” groups use overlapping features, Loban perceives the former as a superficial lack of precision, while the latter is a fundamental problem in usage; the difference is not in the linguistic practices, but in how they are perceived.

In many ways, this mirrors Bonfiglio’s account of the influence of racial ideologies on modern ideas of ‘standard’ American English. In Race and the Rise of Standard American (2011), he traces an increasingly negative evaluation of speech associated with the South and with northern cities, fueled by racist anxieties around demographic and cultural change as immigration surged and the westward expansion of the United States met its geographical limits. Bonfiglio argues that these regions came to be seen as racially contaminated because of their associations with African Americans and with non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. As a result, the Midwest and the West emerge as linguistic and cultural ideals, due to their association with whiteness, despite their relative economic and political weakness.

In the texts analyzed in this paper, we see some of the same themes, particularly the general connections between whiteness and standard language, and the emergence of Midwestern English as especially ‘standard’ (see Golden, 1960: 8-9). But Bonfiglio, perhaps because he focuses more on earlier texts, misses the importance of the Great Migration and social changes prompted by the civil rights movement. In fact, anti-Blackness in general is underexplored in his work; in comparison to his thorough discussion of anti-immigrant sentiment and how it surfaces in writings about language and about United States demographics,
Bonfiglio’s examination of linguistic anti-Blackness is somewhat superficial. Nevertheless, his analysis of linguistic enregisterment and how it is shaped by race is helpful for understanding what is happening in these midcentury texts. Like Rosa and Flores, Bonfiglio shows how changing ideas of ‘standardness’ are not necessarily inspired by changing usage, and how broader social dynamics shape how features become associated with certain bodies and populations.

While such accounts of language use seem inconsistent and nonsensical from a purely linguistic perspective, they are consistent with the logics of racism, and in connection with the historical context, we can see how this process of linguistic description not only reflects racial hierarchies, but also reinforces them. These evaluations are occurring in the midst of disruptions to the racial order and the ensuing white supremacist panic. Research on variation and language use has always served as a tool of colonialism and the justification of exploitative hierarchies (McElhinny & Heller, 2017; Irvine & Gal, 2000); this scholarship on ‘standard English’, in particular, is one mechanism of maintaining the distinction between white and Black communities in the United States, and the superiority of white people (and their language practices). Regardless of these scholars’ conscious intentions, this work and this conception of language reinforces the racial status quo.

In fact, some of these midcentury authors’ contemporaries made similar critiques, noting how mainstream research was dominated by a preoccupation with African American Language that was shaped by social issues. For example, a few years after Hess and Maxwell’s review (1969), Glendon Drake wrote an essay discussing some of the same publications, explicitly calling out the racial anxiety that shaped this work, asserting that “the smoke from Watts and Detroit was still acrid in the nostrils of the white establishment” as academic interest in
‘nonstandard’ dialects in the United States surged (1973). James Sledd is perhaps even more direct, critiquing scholarship and educational approaches which focus on the distinction between so-called white and Black Englishes as “the linguistics of white supremacy” (1969). I echo their concerns and add my analysis to an understanding of how this linguistics of white supremacy unfolded and influenced larger ideologies about language. In the concluding section, I extend their critiques and discuss why these ideas have such purchase in adult immigrant education, and why they are so harmful.

Discussion: English learning as racial assimilation

We see this racialized conception of English surface in adult immigrant language education in part because it is socially dominant and can be expected to permeate everyday discourse in a range of contexts. Raciolinguistic enregisterment informs mainstream understanding about what constitutes ‘good’ English (and who speaks it) in the United States, and so it also shapes educational practices. The classroom is a microcosm of larger society, so dominant ideologies and discourses are replicated within it.

But raciolinguistic ideologies are especially powerful within the particular educational context of adult ESOL because of the focus on racial and cultural assimilation within immigrant education (Spring, 2016). The acquisition of English has been a way for non-Anglo Saxon European immigrants to become white Americans, offering a chance at a more financially stable and socially protected status, especially to their descendants (Pavlenko, 2002). Along the way, as these immigrants learned English, they also adopted cultural and consumer habits closer to the white American mainstream, assimilating into middle class whiteness and so moving up the social hierarchy.
Even for racialized communities who are not recognized as fully ‘white’, relative proximity to whiteness can provide its own protection and status within an exploitative system (Brodkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 2012). Within settler colonialism, this proximity to whiteness depends on distance from Indigeneity, and within racial capitalism, it depends on distance from Blackness (Smith, 2016); both are fundamental to the United States social order, but anti-Blackness is particularly salient in the construction of American identity categories. This phenomenon as it surfaces with different ethnic and racial populations has been theorized in various ways, including racial triangulation theory to describe the positionality of Asian Americans in relation to white and Black Americans (Kim, 1999), and the importance of proximity to whiteness to the meaning of Latinidad (Jones, 2021). Through the denigration of Black (and Indigenous) people and their practices, along with the adoption of some practices associated with whiteness (including religion, family structure, dress, food, and of course, language), racialized people can avoid the bottom of the racial hierarchy even if they cannot reach the top.

This sort of logic is evident in the brief mentions of ‘other’ (i.e., not ‘white’ or ‘Black’) social groups in some of the scholarship I analyze here. For example, as mentioned above, while Loban focuses on Black Americans as nonstandard language users, he does bring other racialized populations into this discussion, asserting that “the results lead one to believe that a similar complicated set of problems would be revealed for many Oriental, Hawaiian (Pidgin), Spanish-speaking, Cajun, and Appalachian subjects” (1966: 49). A similar list appears in one of the articles reviewed by Hess and Maxwell (1969), which also focused on African American language:

“In the United States dialects are spoken by such groups as the Cajuns, the Appalachian mountaineers, and those Negroes and Hawaiians who have experienced little genuine
interaction with the major culture. Other Americans with Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Oriental background often represent still another problem, a different mother tongue in addition to a different culture. To educate the children of all these groups, the schools must develop some intelligent position to what to do about dialect.” (Green, 1965, 724)

Of course, there is no reason to think that the language practices of these very culturally distinct groups would actually be similar in terms of grammatical features or vocabulary, but they do face a similar threat of stigmatization. Additionally, this stigmazation is not just due to xenophobia; in another publication reviewed by Hess and Maxwell, McDavid (1969) contrasts the experience of racialized communities (along with poor white migrants) with that of earlier waves of European immigrants (which, warning, he refers to using terms that are now considered ethnic slurs):

“But society has changed. Muscular strength is now far less important than verbal facility. Farmers and businessmen are obliged to read widely, with understanding, for their own protections in a highly competitive society. The unskilled jobs which gave the Mick and Dago and Hunky a leg up have been taken over by machinery, even as new hordes of unskilled – poor whites, Negroes, Latin Americans, American Indians – crowd into our cities. The percentage of unemployed is probably no greater than the percentage of unfilled jobs; but there is no match, for the unemployed lack the qualifications the new jobs demand: the ability to read with speed and comprehension, the ability to write clear and effective prose, the ability to deal orally with a wide range of situations that demand a mastery of some kind of standard English.” (383)

Here we get a sense of why language has become an especially significant axis of distinction. Not only has work become more linguistic in nature, as McDavid argues (a trend which has only
intensified in recent decades), but language (and specifically dialectal variation) is a way to maintain racial superiority without relying on earlier discourses of racism, which are no longer considered acceptable by the mainstream. These groups are “unskilled” and inferior not because of their race, but because of their language practices (which, of course, are themselves racialized). And while earlier European immigrants were able to assimilate into whiteness in part due to their learning of English, that possibility is closed off to most of the populations listed here. Instead, as in earlier historical moments of intense racial anxiety in the United States – like western expansion and Indigenous relocation, or Reconstruction – language description and education become especially important mechanisms for maintaining social order and emphasizing distinctions among stratified social groups (Spring, 2016).

But while various racialized (and rural/economically marginalized) groups are named as having potentially inferior language practices (and therefore, inferior social status) in this literature, only the language of Black Americans is extensively described and explicitly pathologized. Against this backdrop, English learning and dialect/accent modification becomes a project of creating distance from not just foreign or immigrant identity, but also from Blackness, in order to affirm an individual or community’s legitimacy (Wynter, 2003). As a result, linguistic anti-Blackness shows up as a defining force even in spaces where no Black people might be present (though, of course, many adult English classes do include Black and Afro-descendant students).

Not only does this approach to ‘English’ and ‘English learning’ cause direct harm to Black communities (and especially Black students within English classes; see Baker-Bell, 2020), it also has damaging consequences for all immigrant and racialized students because (linguistic) assimilation is an empty promise within the logics of colonialism and racism. These systems
depend on a central contradiction to maintain hierarchy: oppressed people are inferior, and therefore need to change to become more like the oppressor, and yet, the distinction between these groups must be maintained to justify continued exploitation (Firbas, 2013:140). No matter how much effort is put towards language learning or linguistic assimilation, linguistic (and social) inequality persists because the goalposts are always moving. The eradication of Indigenous languages and the learning of colonial languages is not enough. Even adhering to white dialectal norms is not enough; racialized people can use the same features as white people and still be heard as “nonstandard” (Rosa and Flores, 2017). So, while this approach could be beneficial to the small minority of students who are able to ‘pass’, ultimately, it is deeply harmful to the collective, as it reinforces a raciolinguistic hierarchy designed to exploit working class, racialized immigrants who often enroll in adult ESOL classes in the United States.

This is a reminder of the oppressive potential of language education and scholarship, and the need to be critical about what we are inheriting as language teachers and researchers. Linguistic and social inequality is not just something 'out there'; too often, our writing and our classrooms are key sites of its replication. When we rely on linguistic constructs and pedagogical approaches that are steeped in a history of racism and anti-Blackness, we legitimize the denigration of racialized communities and their language practices and we risk doing immediate psychological harm to students and others in our broader communities, and that is simply incompatible with the idea of writing and teaching for justice. As this genealogical analysis shows, too often, mainstream academic literature (as well as curriculum and pedagogical practices) uncritically replicates the status quo; we urgently need to learn from alternative perspectives, both within research and within communities (Anya, 2021; Austin, 2022; Cushing & Snell, 2023; García, 2019; Von Eschz, Motha, & Kubota, 2020), to resist this “linguistics of
white supremacy” and to develop other ways forward.
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