

# Linguistics as Un-Learning and Re-Learning: Exploring the Boundary between K-12 and the University

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**Abstract** Most people encounter the field of linguistics for the first time in college—if they ever do—which can be viewed as both an opportunity and a challenge. Students’ lack of familiarity with the field is an opportunity, as they are often excited and even liberated by re-learning certain aspects of language according to a (descriptive) linguistic perspective. However, students’ naiveté with linguistics is also a challenge, as many students struggle to un-learn and accept some of the universal truths of the field. This analysis is centered on qualitative data collected in an introductory linguistics course that illustrate student viewpoints on both ends of this spectrum, revealing implications for instructors of linguistics, including how to approach topics that may be met with resistance.

Unlike instructors in fields such as mathematics, music, literature, and the sciences, college-level linguistics instructors in the U.S. are often confronted with classrooms full of students who have little-to-no understanding of the field in which their courses are situated. Most students encounter the field of linguistics for the first time in college—if they ever do—and as such, most lower-level linguistics courses must begin all the way at the beginning, with an explanation of what the word linguistics means and what linguists study.

College students’ lack of familiarity with linguistics comes about as a result of the design and implementation of their K–12 language education in the U.S. Elementary and secondary English and language arts classes are often highly or even solely focused on reading and writing rather than on other kinds of language-based study. As evidence of this, when I was taking courses to earn my B.A. in English education, I took a several literature courses and several composition courses, in addition to required courses centered on how to teach literature and writing, but I was not required to take any courses in linguistics, and even taking an English grammar course was an option among several classes to fulfill a requirement for the degree. Moreover, while I did opt to take the grammar course, it was rhetorical in nature—the instructor did not take a linguistic approach to the content.

In addition to these teacher training realities, it should be acknowledged that there is a history of scholarship in the field of English education that started around the 1960s in which teaching grammar is discouraged, as research studies in the field have shown that explicit grammar instruction does not lead to better student writers (cf. [Braddock et al. 1963](#); [Anderson 2005](#); and [Jones et al. 2013](#), among many others). Of course, the aforementioned ‘explicit grammar instruction’ often looks nothing like grammar instruction situated in the field of linguistics (think: worksheets with fill-in-the-blank or circle-the-verb type exercises), and there is also often little-to-no discussion in such scholarship on the other potential benefits of grammar study—not all language study ought to be in service to the skill of writing. Moreover, this strict emphasis on teaching writing and reading in English/language arts classes has coincided with an increased emphasis on standardized testing, as these are the types of language skills required of students on these high-stakes tests.

In short, then, there is a profound lack, generally, in K–12 language education in the U.S. on any kind of linguistics-based content. Furthermore, the structural content that students do receive (for example, in foreign language learning or in the minimal grammar or phonetics material they are taught) is likely steeped in a strictly prescriptive perspective, presented as rules to follow and ‘thou-shalt-nots’. So this is our situation as college-level instructors of linguistics: for better or worse, most students enter our classrooms after thirteen years of daily ‘English class’ (and likely at least a little foreign language study) still knowing very little about the actual linguistic structure of English or about how languages really work in general. Over time, I’ve learned to view this reality as both a challenge and an opportunity, which is the central tenet of this presentation. In what follows, I will share and discuss some data I collected while teaching a 100-level undergraduate introductory linguistics course at a medium-sized university in the Midwest. The data illustrate student viewpoints on both ends of this ‘opportunity-challenge spectrum’, and an analysis of such viewpoints reveals implications for instructors of linguistics at the college level, including how to harness students’ enthusiasm to use in constructive ways in the classroom as well as how to approach topics that may be met with student resistance.

Before proceeding to the data, I will briefly discuss the course design and research methodology. This particular course, in addition to centering on the basics of the field of linguistics, maintained a special focus on language variation. In fact, the class was specifically designed to cultivate students’ development of positive, linguistically principled language attitudes, which served to counteract both individual students’ linguistic prejudice as well as widespread language-based social justice issues. Moreover, the target population for the course was students who come

from privileged language backgrounds, thus, those who stand to gain the most from preserving the status quo regarding whose varieties are widely perceived as ‘correct’ or ‘prestigious’ and whose varieties are widely perceived as ‘incorrect’ or ‘inferior’. To target students’ negative language ideologies, I used African American English (AAE) and Chicano English (CE) in the curriculum as our primary sources of language data while we advanced through the levels of analysis in the field. So, after we had studied the basics of phonetics and phonology, for example, we examined specific phonological features of AAE and CE, such as consonant cluster reduction and [θ] and [ð] assimilation. And after we studied the basics of morphology and syntax, we analyzed morphosyntactic features of the varieties, such as variation in 3rd person singular verb forms, multiple negation, and habitual BE. Students were then assessed on their knowledge of these nonstandard features and on their ability to describe the features linguistically, using the terminology of the field. The design of the course has proven to be vastly successful, not only in cultivating positive language ideologies but also in cementing students’ introductory knowledge of the field through the analysis of rich and complicated language data. Elsewhere, I discuss in greater depth the design and results of this particular pedagogical model for teaching the introductory linguistics course (cf. [Hercula 2016](#)).

Research and data collection was conducted using a primarily qualitative, teacher-research methodology. The data included below are based on my notes and reflections during and after class sessions as well as on students’ written assignment submissions. Specifically, all student excerpts used in this study were taken from students’ end-of-semester reflective responses, in which I posed questions prompting students to reflect on the most meaningful outcomes of their participation in the course. The research I conducted on my teaching of this course received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the institution where the course was taught, and all student names that appear below are pseudonyms, used to protect students’ identities. Furthermore, all written student excerpts are unedited from students’ original submissions. I will now turn to the data, starting on the ‘opportunity side’ of the spectrum. I view students’ lack of familiarity with the field as an opportunity because students are often excited and even liberated by the re-learning of certain aspects of language according to a (descriptive) linguistic perspective. They enjoy learning facts including: linguistic innovation is an important part of the growth of a language (as opposed to the ‘these kids nowadays are ruining our language’ point of view), and prescriptive language rules are linguistically arbitrary (rather than thinking, ‘I must be unintelligent because I still cannot write perfect, grammatically correct sentences in my papers’). Below, I will provide and discuss two student responses that illustrate how liberating students found the course.

Leila, a sophomore majoring in finance, wrote:

I think the most useful part of this class was its structure; we were able to understand AAE as a variety ... [and] learning about mainstream English and AAE hand in hand was very helpful. ... I can sincerely say, and I'm sure this is no surprise, this class has taught me so much in terms of how I see the people around me. ... I never thought I was one to judge based on an accent or dialect, but throughout this semester I was able to discover things about myself that I was glad I changed. ... I honestly feel like this class should be something every student should take. It teaches tolerance and understanding, and most importantly it allows freedom, which is something not many other classes offer.

In this excerpt, Leila acknowledges her new-found 'tolerance and understanding' as rooted in her knowledge of the structure and features of AAE—this is not just a class that cheerleads for linguistic diversity but rather demands for its acknowledgement through the study of linguistic data. Especially noteworthy in her response is the statement that the course allows for 'freedom'—that is, not the freedom to turn in assignments late, for example, but rather the freedom to ask questions, the freedom to disagree, the freedom to acknowledge a change in perspective as positive. She found in this course and its content liberation that, unfortunately, she does not normally encounter in her college-level courses.

Similarly, Maria, a senior majoring in political science, wrote:

I used to look down at people who spoke AAE, for example, thinking that they talked like that because they refused to speak correctly. However, I have discarded that idea and embraced the concept that there are various ways to speak English. ... I realize now that the few in power spread those ignorant assumptions and to think the way I used to is a sure ticket to believing other racial stereotypes. ... I also know that since I have taken this class I have a responsibility to spread what I now know to other people; especially to those that make stereotypical language comments to others or myself while I am around. I will continue to question everything that is taught to me and to think, 'well, from whose perspective is it coming from?'. Learning is truly a lifelong endeavor, this class has truly proved that.

Maria came away from the course empowered, not only in her understanding of language variation and with greater tolerance for speakers of nonstandard dialects but also with a powerful new framework through which to view the world around her. The course liberated her, giving her permission to question and challenge what she is taught, not to just passively accept information presented to her as fact. In re-learning certain ‘facts’ about language (and about humans) in this class—facts that contradicted previous knowledge that she thought to be true—Maria gained the ability to interrogate the world around her, which is such an invaluable and empowering skill.

As these two examples (and the many more like them that can be found in my data set) illustrate, students benefit in various and important ways from taking linguistics courses. And the opportunity we have as their instructors is to harness their enthusiasm to further the impact of the content in their lives. As a simple example, I encourage students, over Thanksgiving or spring break, to go home and share some of what they have learned with their families to practice talking about language variation with people who likely have not studied it. I then encourage students to report back to the rest of the class with their results. It’s a simple task, but the activity offers great opportunities to evaluate such conversations in the classroom, and it often builds students’ excitement (and courage) about having more such conversations in the future. I have also offered students opportunities to apply their ‘re-learned knowledge’ in other ways—whether as a requirement for the course or not—for example, by engaging in a conversation partners program with nonnative speakers of English or by conducting a ‘language in my life’ research study of their home communities, a project that has been developed and proposed by [Alim \(2007\)](#). Students’ active engagement with language study outside the classroom not only reinforces their ‘re-learned knowledge’ but also serves to enrich the classroom space when discussions of outside projects make it back into classroom discussions.

Let us now turn to the ‘challenge side’ of the spectrum. College students’ naiveté with linguistics is a challenge because many students, by this time, have become fully socialized into standard language ideology. [Lippi-Green \(2012: 67\)](#) explains that standard language ideology is ‘a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class.’ Students fully engrained into this perspective, largely as a result of their K–12 education, struggle to un-learn and accept some of the universal truths of the field of linguistics, such as: standardized English is not inherently better than other Englishes, and all dialects, even those that are socially stigmatized, are rule-governed and legitimate. [Milambiling](#)

(2001: 249-250) writes that ‘how [students] [...] view language is often based on misinformation or even ethnocentrism. People may have accepted maxims from elementary school, such as “two negatives make a positive,” or they might often think of their own language or dialect as being superior to those of other groups’. As such, linguistics instructors often encounter student resistance toward content that contradicts students’ previous knowledge, and, as my data show, this student resistance is especially prominent among students who have grown up with a certain degree of linguistic privilege. As Winans (2012: 151) explains: ‘students often struggle with significant emotional discomfort ... as familiar assumptions, beliefs, habits, and even understandings of identity are disrupted. This struggle is especially difficult for those of us in positions of privilege ... people who are often unpracticed at exploring the norms that naturalize our power and privilege.’ As such, linguistically privileged students may struggle significantly with un-learning in the linguistics classroom, as it necessarily involves a critical interrogation of the systems that have traditionally promoted their own interests. Below, I will provide and analyze some student data that illustrates this resistance.

Dave, a sophomore majoring in business, wrote:

My opinion on the sociolinguistic status of English varieties has changed slightly. I do not think that any one language is better than the other. However, when it comes to something like hiring a worker for a job, it is important for the store owner to hire someone who has a language that is the most similar to their customers. For example a store owner in a white neighborhood that speaks mainly ME [mainstream English] would not want to hire a AAE or CE speaker over a ME speaker who would better be able to communicate. Vice Versa, a store owner in a AAE speaking area would not want to hire a ME or CE speaker over a AAE worker. Things like this can seem discriminating but fluent and complete understanding in communication is what is needed in business.

Dave’s response suggests that he is influenced by the ideology that language is a commodity, and specifically, that being able to speak a privileged variety of English is a commodity. This ideology takes the view that a privileged variety of English is necessary for access to wealth in capitalist systems; in fact, the persistence of such an ideology is reflected in the pervasive belief that speakers of stigmatized varieties will only be successful (i.e. employed, wealthy, and ‘professional’) if they learn a socially privileged variety of English. While we discussed the problems and inherent inequality associated with the perpetuation of this ideology in class, Dave

seems not to have internalized those critiques, and, instead, continues to advocate for traditional power structures when it comes to the social perceptions of language.

Similarly, Greg, a sophomore with an undeclared major, wrote:

My opinions of African American [English] have changed to understand that it is a language and does in fact have its own set of rules and things you cannot say. ... It has not changed in the sense that African American English is equal to Mainstream English. Unfortunately, I feel that taking a language and adding a few minor 'rules' does not in fact make it a language. I understand that a large theory of African American English is that it was derived from slaves trying to communicate. I would like you to focus on the main word in the sentence, which is trying. Which means that they were merely mimicking things that they had overheard, or were barely taught as a means to communicate with white slave drivers on a minimum/necessity only basis. So does that mean that they were taught the wrong way of speaking mainstream English? Just a thought I continue to think about.

Greg entered the course with some very strong, negative views toward AAE—views he was willing and perhaps even proud to openly share. I knew from the start that it would be difficult to change his attitudes toward language variation, despite the fact that he actually seemed quite engaged in the course material. There is some obvious racism and historical inaccuracy in his statement, which I surely did not teach him, suggesting that his response largely functioned as a denial of experiencing any attitudinal shifts throughout the course rather than as a legitimate response to the question about what he had learned. We see in his response very serious resistance to a perspective that would threaten the privilege of 'mainstream English', of which he claimed to be a speaker.

Student responses of this type were few in number, but all of them came from students who were male, white, and speakers of a socially privileged variety of English, with only one exception. The common thread throughout all of the data on this end of the spectrum is that these students believed that admitting to a shift in their belief or knowledge system represents weakness rather than growth, especially when it comes to interrogating systems of inequality that have historically benefitted them. Cook et al. (2012: 291-292), citing a number of other studies, explain that:

As awareness of their privileged status emerges, White students may respond with feelings of guilt, anger, and shame. These strong

emotions can suppress a White person's further exploration of how they may have unknowingly benefited from their privileged status. White students may respond with denial or defensiveness, sometimes leading to resistance, paralysis, or scapegoating. For White students to move past this impasse, they need to endure the pain and confusion that often accompanies this awareness.

It is clear that both Dave and Greg had entered into the phase of resistance and scapegoating described here, and thus, were unable to perceive a shift in knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs as a positive or even possible outcome. Overall, then, in order to promote the important process of un-learning, linguistics instructors need to be prepared to help students process the shame, guilt, and other emotions that may arise through the process.

As such, I will now discuss a few strategies that I have found work well when it comes to addressing student viewpoints on the 'challenge side' of the spectrum. The first is to use my own experiences and background as a model. Sharing with students my own (ongoing) process of recognizing my bias, learning about language variation, confronting my own privilege, and responding with critical intervention strategies serves as an example as they engage in their own processes of tackling their privilege. Another key strategy is to attempt to alleviate guilt and shame through the acknowledgment that no one has control over which language variety they will grow up speaking, and similarly, no one has control over the social structure into which they are thrust at birth—in particular, a social structure that values and privileges certain subject positions and ways of speaking and devalues and discriminates against others. Thus, those who have been conditioned to hold negative and/or misinformed language ideologies do not necessarily have them by choice but rather via socialization. In other words, I help students to understand that they are not 'bad people' for growing up in a broken society. But I also reinforce that once people's attention has been drawn to the inequalities in that broken society, especially if they are members of a privileged group, they have a responsibility to analyze that privilege, developing an awareness of the ways in which they benefit from their privilege and working toward acquiring critical intervention strategies they can use in the future—without getting stuck in a cycle of shame and blame that could lead, instead, to paralysis or resistance.

In this presentation, I have sought to provide ideas for how to both engage students in the opportunity of re-learning and support students through the challenge of un-learning in the linguistics classroom. I would like to end with a return to the boundary between K-12 and the university, making the case for the inclusion of more



linguistics-based pedagogy in K–12 English and language arts classrooms. Without a doubt, the ‘challenge side’ of the spectrum would look very different if students were given some experience with linguistics before entering college. There are a number of linguists and educators doing some amazing work to promote more linguistically sound language education in the younger grades. [Cooke \(2017\)](#), for example, has developed some unique research, online classes, and educational products centered on new approaches for teaching spelling—approaches that focus on teaching the etymology of and historical relationships between words rather than relying on false concepts such as ‘silent letters’. Consider, also, the approaches to teaching about standard English proposed by linguists including [Wolfram et al. \(1999\)](#), [Delpit \(2006\)](#), and [Alim & Smitherman \(2012\)](#), among many others—approaches that center on teaching linguistic principles and the truths surrounding the social inequality of certain varieties, not on the false notion that acquiring a privileged spoken variety will lead to magic keys that unlock all of society’s doors.

In general, more linguistics-based instruction in the younger grades would help to bridge the boundary between high school and college in terms of students’ development, first, of principled understandings of how language really works, and secondly, of positive attitudes toward language variation, which has the potential to profoundly impact how they engage and encounter human difference in their lives. And in our current sociopolitical climate, I would argue that there is nothing more important that we could be teaching.

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