

A Noted Linguist's Viewpoint

Taken from Anne Curzan, April 22nd, 2005

The fact is that when people discriminate against particular language varieties, they are discriminating against the speakers of those varieties. Language is the cover for debates about race, immigration, and other charged social issues. We must realize that when we condemn a dialect as “bad English,” in fact we are condemning the speakers of that dialect.

Aks for ask? “Ignorant” (people say). Ain’t? “Lazy.” Double negatives? “Sloppy.” But in fact, people are not judging the constructions themselves—they are judging the speakers who use them. I can tell you with full confidence that there is nothing linguistically wrong with the constructions themselves.

In fact, aks is actually historically older than ask and used to be a literary form. Shouldn’t used to be as condemned as ain’t but now it’s okay. Chaucer used double negatives. How is it okay for us to condemn speakers who use these forms now, but hold them up as literary in earlier periods?

Now some of you may be thinking: But language is different from gender or race. Language is more of a choice. Let’s step back and consider that assumption. We grow up speaking the way those in our home community speak, particularly our parents and other close friends and family. It makes logical sense that we will learn the language (pronunciation and grammar) that they speak. For some English speakers, that language is close to Standard English. For some English speakers, it is not. For all speakers, the home language is the language that binds their family and community. It carries meaning and power within that community. Geneva Smitherman, a linguist from MSU, reminds us: “See, when you lambast the home language that kids bring to school, you ain just dissin dem, you talking about they mommas!” (1998: 99)

I don’t think anyone should be dissed at school. No one should be silenced because Standard English is not their home dialect. No one should feel like that have to give up what they bring to school in order to acquire a new set of grammatical rules.

Again, let me reiterate: I am not saying that we shouldn’t teach the conventions of written Standard English. I am saying that we must teach prescriptive grammar and usage rules in such a way that they are not weapons of discrimination. Students are adding prescriptive rules to their linguistic repertoire, not replacing what they already have. And there are ways to teach grammar that encourage active discussion rather than squelch voices.