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The Standard English Myth: Fluency in Language and the Illusion of Intelligence

In the world we live in today, language is often used as a tool to help us understand one another, however it can become a barrier that reinforces social hierarchies. The “standard English” myth- the belief that there is a single idealized form of English that is universally accepted and correct- has shaped people’s perceptions of ability, worth, and intelligence. This myth not only marginalizes people that speak different languages, but also creates a system where “proper” English is honored and the other English is criticized. This kind of system has an impact on people’s perspective on themselves resulting in them having a low self-esteem and little confidence.

One of the most severe consequences of the Standard English myth is the assumption that one’s fluency in English signals their intelligence. Not only is this belief socially damaging, but it can also be seen in data. Ura et al (2015) developed the MPAAE, (Measure of Prejudice Against Accented English), which is a tool that measures prejudice people face based on their English and accents. This scale has revealed that “speakers with accents are less trustworthy and competent at delivering accurate information” (541). This study has shown that people with accents were ranked lower, despite the actual knowledge that they have. This suggests that intelligence is not based on ability or knowledge, but based on how you sound. Similarly, Clark

et al (2021) also found a similar connection. In this study, the relationship between speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and their clients were examined closely to see if there was an impact on their professional judgment. It was revealed that “SLPs were likely to give poorer ratings to speakers who were from a different linguistic background to themselves” (545). With this bias being evident in the workspace real consequences can follow. Such as inadequate care, wrong diagnosis, and exclusion from certain services offered. When linguistic fluency is interpreted as being smart, institutions and society can misjudge someone which is unfair. One’s fluency in “Standard English” should be associated with their intelligence since that holds no standing.

More specifically, educational/professional institutions and educators play into this narrative reinforcing this linguistic bias. Oftentimes when kids are in the classroom, they often hear their teachers say to them that the way they speak is either “right” or “wrong” which leaves such a strong impression on how they should talk. Wolfram (2013) reinforces this point through a classroom observation. He notes that “We are socialized into a simple dichotomy: Language forms are right or wrong(28).” and “the recognition of language patterns and governing rules made the students for the first time that their varied use of ‘standard’ English did not indicate a lack of intelligence” (29-30). This recognition that their own dialects are valued and validated challenges the assumption that linguistic difference equals intellectual inferiority.

Additionally, Clark et al (2021) also demonstrate how this narrative is enforced to kids at such a young age. They explained that "perspective socialisation through institutions, such as schools, supports children to develop the range of registers required for communicative competence in mainstream context”(552). This displays how in settings such as schools, students are trained to speak in a way that fits into societal norms and not their true selves. Educational

institutions need to realize the harm that they are inflicting to kids. When these biases are reinforced at such a young age, it stays with them until adulthood. Instead, educational institutions need to challenge this myth encouraging linguistic inclusion.

Language bias doesn't only affect individuals, it also supports an unfair system that serves as a form of exclusion. Ura et al (2015) explains that "Dynamism items indirected that accented speakers lack activeness and liveliness, which may lead to a poor assessment of their leadership potential" (540). When someone has an accent, it serves as a way to judge someone's background, and not only their speech. This kind of bias can block someone from getting leadership roles, job offers, or even just respect. If someone is seen as less skilled just because of their accent, opportunities that they deserve can pass them by. Over time, this creates a system where only people who speak "Standard English" will be positioned in such roles leaving others behind. Linguistic bias acts like a barrier not allowing people truly understand or respect others with different speaking backgrounds making an unfair social hierarchy.

Linguistic bias is not only about unfair judgements, it's a system that affects people's day to day life. It affects how they are treated in schools, healthcare, and other institutions. The belief that "Standard English" is the only "correct" way to speak leads to unfair assumptions about one's intelligence, worth, and ability. These biases are taught to kids at such a young age which can play a part on their view of other people in the future. This causes harm by making people feel as if their voices don't matter and by making them think that they have to change the way they speak in order to succeed in life.

Works Cited

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