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English 6321 Critical Theory

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Drawing on at least three of the authors we have read, explicate one of these concepts:

 standard language ideology

Qualifying Exam Practice #3

The concept of standard language ideologies, as discussed by Davilla, is a way in which language is thought of as existing in one correct form. These notions of standard language ideology are deeply imbedded in the United States. As a result, there is a constant push toward establishing, and continuing to uphold the single correct from of speaking and writing. These language practices create and/or determine identities for those with language practices that exist outside the standard. SLI does not only affect multilingual students and second language learners. It can also be harmful to monolingual students, but more importantly SLI is damaging to society outside of the academic world. The purpose of this paper is to first define standard language ideologies (SLI), then to analyze the ways in which SLI can create or determine identity through indexicality, and to address the work of current scholars, such as Davila, Matsuda, Mangelsdorf, and Canagarajah that address and/or resist these specific language ideologies.

These notions of standard language ideologies are deeply embedded across the globe, and in the U.S. Davila brings attention to SLI in composition studies in the way the field of “recognizes ‘standard’ edited American English (SEAE) as a gatekeeper that often excludes nontraditional students from academia” (181). This role as gatekeeper leads to the negation of any and all language practices that fall outside of the established standard. Davila through Lesley Milroy views an important characteristic of SLI as an ideology defined by “the belief that there is one and only one correct spoken form of the language, modeled [sic] on a single correct written form” (184). This characteristic of standard language ideology is problematic because it creates a hierarchy of language. SLI demands that everything that exists outside what is considered correct does not have value. This does affects a student identified as a second language learner or native English speaker that speaks a variety of English that is not SEAE. The result is a discrimination against other language practices, both within and outside English language practices. It excludes other language practices as being beneficial to a student’s development based solely on the notion that the standard is superior. Standard language ideologies, according to Davila, “provides the belief system and justification necessary for mandating SEAE and denigrating other language varieties ­­– and the people who use them – and masks the politics associated with such acts” (184). This specific belief system ignores linguistic capital that exists outside the established standard. It creates separation between those that possess the skills to effectively use these specific and accepted language practices, and those that come into the classroom with knowledge of other language practices.

This separation and notion of the one correct form leads to indexicality. Indexicality is defined as “the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings” (183). These identities are the result of people relying on “different types of language practices, language features, or languages in general to determine or create identity, to assign various characteristics to people and social groups” (183). These identities are troublesome because they exist only in response to language practices based on one correct form. If the notion that one correct form persists, then any identity formed based on language practices that are outside the standard would be perceived as negative, because based on the one correct form standard the practices that make up that identity are incorrect. This is especially detrimental because linguistic practices are the basis for assigning identities to people, and the identities assigned are not ones that possess value.

The preference of one language variety over others makes it “common sense to discriminate against other language varieties” (184). This discrimination acts itself out in SLI practices, because such practices assign negative value to other language practices. This continues the function of SLI as a gatekeeper. Those in power can set these standards, and as Mangelsdorf points out “because so many people who speak nonstandard forms of ‘English’ or languages other than ‘English’ are not white, these manifestations of the standard language ideology, for some, serve as coded expressions of racism” (117). The separation created by SLI allows for what Mangelsdorf describes as “a tacit assumption of standard language ideology” that results in the idea that “people must master the language norms in order to participate in mainstream culture” (117). It is clear then why standard language ideologies are associated with dominant power systems. People with language practices that don’t fall in line with SLI are excluded from mainstream culture. This can manifest itself in more places than the classroom. SLI, when acting as a gatekeeper, is constricting to multilingual and monolingual people. It forces speakers, and writers, to use only one variety of the language, because all other forms don’t have value.

With the notion of SLI there is pressure on instructors to adhere to the standard language practices, and expectations are that students should master them. Matsuda discusses the myth of linguistic homogeneity, which is the acceptance of the “dominant image of students in English studies is the assumption that students are by default native speakers of a privileged variety of English from the United States” (639). Therefore, when a student’s writing doesn’t match the dominant image, or standard, it becomes othered. This problematic because of the common goal of composition classes is to assist students in bettering their writing. When an instructor views writing outside of the dominant image as inferior, they make assumptions about their practices. These assumptions about students’ writing are always negative. Language practices that may be helpful in improving students’ writing go ignored if they fall outside of the dominant image. In addition to the dominant image of students’ writing is the practice of language containment. Language containment through the practice of placement exams serves to keep the dominant image in place because it keeps “language differences in the composition classroom from reaching a critical mass,” and it’s this critical mass that would allow for the dominant language to be challenged. Matsuda warns that these practices do not only affect international students, but also what he refers to as “resident second-language writers” and “native speakers of unprivileged varieties of English” (648). Matsuda urges that instructors resist the policy of language containment, and approach the college composition classroom as the “multilingual space that it is, where the presence of language differences is the default” (649). Creating a classroom that is a “multilingual space” will include, as opposed to exclude under SLI practices, more than one language practice. It gives students a space to decide which practice best serves their needs.

Canagarajah introduces the idea that English should be viewed as a “multinational language,” and as such it “belongs to diverse communities,” which adds another layer to the critique of standard language practices. Matsuda brought attention to native-born speakers of an unprivileged English, and Canagarajah urges us to “acknowledge that we are novice speakers of the other’s variety, we will make efforts to develop competence in it (if necessary for our purposes) without expecting the other to defer to our own variety as the universal norm” (590). Even within English there are many varieties, therefore SLI is not something that only affects second-language learners. Canagarajah, like the previous scholars, views SLI practices as detrimental to students’ growth. Instructors that choose to uphold SLI practices in the classroom devalue students’ own languages, and students are thus unable to develop much needed skills in multilingualism, because “classes based on monolingual pedagogies disable students in contexts of linguistic pluralism” (592). It is important then that instructors incorporate code meshing into the classroom.

Code meshing encourages the use of multiple dialects, and does not negate language practices of students that fall outside the standard, which includes more than bilingual, or second language learners. Code meshing, in alignment with the view of multiple Englishes, benefits students that speak a variety of Englishes. Code meshing forces students to “know bring in their preferred varieties in rhetorically strategic ways,” and the value of this is apparent in the way that students must not only know how to incorporate different varieties in the correct context. Cangarajah points out that multilingual students must use these different varieties and “bring them together to serve their interests” (599). This approach to language and writing practices better serves students than negating whatever linguistic capital students bring to the class that falls outside SLI. Code meshing also has value outside of the classroom. SLI, as previously mentioned, does not only have a presence in a classroom setting.

SLI is deep rooted in academia, and society. The hierarchy of language supports systemic discrimination. Resisting SLI proves to be difficult. Mangelsdorf points out that policies enforced in education promote SLI “inevitably support linguistic containment and standard language ideology at the expense of students’ lived languages” (121). This will not change until multiple languages, and linguistic practices are valued in and outside the classroom. For instructors of composition, and the field of RWS, the language practices of second-language learners, and students that use other varieties of English must become part of the classroom. Matsuda urges that instructors make the classroom a “multilingual space.” The challenge isn’t merely resisting these ideologies, or developing practices that value what SLI does not. The challenge is continuing to work on incorporating other linguistic practices when SLI is so ingrained in education, and society that any change will be incredibly slow.

The study SLI are of great importance to the field of RWS. RWS can be the flagship for promoting, accepting, and encouraging multiple language practices in the classroom. RWS can move beyond linguistic profiling. RWS instructors and scholars, should be aware of the role of SLI in education, and the many ways in which their classrooms can include what the established standard excludes.

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