

CHAPTER 6.

LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE AND LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

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Here's the good news: U.S. writing studies has long held commitments to inclusion and justice. Composition courses have been described as "institutional and professional responses to challenged standards ... by writers who were said to be unprepared" (Bartholomae 11). A specific focus on linguistic justice has been visible at least since the Conference on College Composition and Communication 1974 adoption of "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL). Subsequent efforts, including "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!"¹ and writing research on language ideologies (Davila; Milu; Pattanayak 82-83), translingual writing (Horner et al.), communal justicing (Gere et al., "Communal Justicing"), and Critical Language Awareness (CLA) (Alim; Shapiro), raise awareness about linguistic injustice and illustrate alternatives.

There's bad news, too. We are far from linguistic justice in writing classrooms. Linguistic miseducation continues, focused on prescriptive rules instead of how language works (Smitherman, "Raciolinguistics"). Standardized English is still often treated as inherently correct or singularly necessary (Richardson). Nonstandardized usage is often treated as error, even as research suggests student success doesn't depend on standardized mechanical correctness as much as instructors think (Crossley et al.; Freedman; Matsuda). And many instructors who believe in linguistic diversity still end up perpetuating language hierarchies because they fear not doing so will be a disservice to students (Weaver 14).

We are still, in other words, living in a language regulation paradigm, characterized by a lot of language discrimination but very little language knowledge.

The decades-long divide between linguistic theory and writing pedagogy hasn't helped. The SRTOL statement was "solidly grounded" in linguistics but ultimately "fell short in terms of linking language theory to teaching practice" (Smitherman, "Raciolinguistics" 10). Since then, writing studies has suffered

¹ The statement can be accessed at <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice>.

“the dismissal of various insights from language studies” (Matsuda 150) and decades of the “erasure of language” (Connors; MacDonald). Historically, writing studies has attended to language itself *or* to language ideologies, but not both together (Aull, “Attention to Language”). In turn, writing studies scholarship suggests that linguistic training is necessary to disrupt “the inertia of the discipline’s discriminatory pasts” (Gere et al., “Communal Justicing” 391; Shapiro).

Put another way: we need language knowledge to advance linguistic justice. We need awareness of how language works in systematic (rule-governed) ways at the level of lexis, grammar, and paragraphs to advance linguistic justice, a mission for writing education in which language variation is valued and viewed with equity and language users are empowered with rhetorical agency, or the ability to understand and make informed language choices in diverse situations. We need the former to achieve the latter; otherwise, widespread linguistic miseducation and erasure of language and language knowledge will continue to work against even our most well-intentioned efforts.

We already have clear illustrations of how language knowledge supports linguistic justice. For example, Geneva Smitherman outlines Black English discourse and syntax patterns on the 1988–1989 NAEP exams to debunk the notion that that Black English features were rhetorically ineffective (“‘The Blacker the Berry’”). Anne Curzan traces usage change and the rule-governed nature of nonstandardized usage to make a case for questioning the rules of grammar and who makes them. Staci Perryman-Clark shows how knowledge of phonological and syntactical features of African American English helps students analyze genres and achieve rhetorical goals. April Baker-Bell discusses syntax, semantics, and phonology of Black Language with students as part of challenging anti-Black racism in the classroom. Gere et al. briefly note four facts about language variation in support of communal justicing (“Communal Justicing”).

In a similar vein, this study makes a case for analyzing language patterns as part of demonstrating linguistic equality and supporting rhetorical agency, and it draws from open access data in Gere’s *Developing Writers in Higher Education* to do so. First, I show evidence of common misconceptions about written English. Then, I analyze move patterns in published and student writing to illustrate how we can counter misconceptions with language knowledge.

In this way, the study builds on and extends work done by Anne Ruggles Gere in order to show how language knowledge helps us learn more, and judge less, in encounters with written English. The study illustrates how students’ and instructors’ knowledge of linguistic patterns can expand our conscious understanding of written genres (Gere et al., “Local Assessment” 624–25) and support more just approaches to language variation (Gere et al., “Communal Justicing”).

THE MOTIVATION, PART 1: MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WRITING

Many instructors have “impressionistic,” rather than concrete or systematic, ideas about writing and grammar (Duncan and Vanguri xiii), such as “know[ing] a good essay when [they] see it” (Lea and Street 40). Impressionistic ideas coexist with more precisely false ideas about writing, which circulate in public understandings held by teachers, students, parents, administrators, and lawmakers (Ball and Loewe). Unfortunately, vague and discriminatory ideas about English usage and writing have a long history in policies, tests, and college admissions, which refer to *writing* as prescriptively correct or not, rather than according to what is grammatically possible and meaningful in English (Aull, *You Can't Write That*).

In their *Developing Writers in Higher Education* study, Gere and her colleagues show that undergraduate students internalize these misconceptions. The study includes interviews with over 150 University of Michigan undergraduates about their writing, and the interview transcripts are freely accessible.² I was thus able to download all interview transcripts and identify and read every reference to the word “grammar,” all of which showed one or both of the following themes:

1. Grammar is something students do not feel they know, but they want to know; and/or
2. Grammar is simple—referring only to conventions, or to prescriptive rules.

In other words, many references to grammar showed that students were eager for more language knowledge. Many also pointed to what Smitherman calls “linguistic miseducation,” or when “teachers be obsessed wit teaching ‘correct’ grammar, spelling and pronunciation rather than teaching students what language is and allows human beings to do” (“Raciolinguistics” 6).

THEME 1: GRAMMAR IS SOMETHING STUDENTS DON'T KNOW, BUT WANT TO KNOW

Most students who referred to *grammar* described lacking explicit language knowledge, even if they felt they were proficient writers. Tellingly, one student described that learning English grammar would occur through self-study—not something they would be taught in English or writing class. The student therefore said they wouldn't study English grammar, despite that they would “love” it:

² The interview transcripts are available under the “Resources” heading at <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10079890>.

"I don't know if it's so much important for me to know exactly how everything is written and the grammar to it ... —if I had enough time, I would love to do so. I don't have enough motivation to self-teach myself or go through and independently study English."³

Another student described an experience in the business school that highlighted their lack of conscious language knowledge: "I remember there was a checklist that asked, 'Oh, are you bad with pronouns or adjectives or syntax?' I was like, 'Uh, I'm not even sure what half of this really means, exactly'".⁴

This theme, grammar as something students did not know but wanted to know, also came up in answer to the following interview question: *If you could tell your teachers one thing about writing or how to teach writing better, what would you tell them?* One student replied that "grammar usage" was "really important," especially for introductory courses.⁵ Another noted that even seemingly "repetitive" grammar instruction "can sometimes be really helpful."⁶

THEME 2: GRAMMAR IS SIMPLIFIED OR NARROWLY UNDERSTOOD

Several interviews reflected limited conceptions of grammar, as: (a) conventions, such as punctuation; (b) "simple" or "little"; and/or (c) narrowly correct or incorrect. For example, the following interview response illustrated (a) and (b): "We also did, I remember with each class, we had some sort of grammar lesson. I think one of the one's we spent the most time on was the colon and the semicolon. Yeah, I think just little things of tweaking writing."⁷

Describing English language learning in their family, another student suggested their own grammar learning focused on (c). The student noted, "One of my [relatives], he's learning English right now. I was teaching him. I was like, 'I can only tell you what's right or wrong. I can't actually describe it to you.' He was like, 'The adjective goes here, then it's the pronoun.' He was listing all these—I was like, 'That's not how I learned my language.'"⁸ In this case, we can see both themes: a lack of explicit grammar knowledge, and an understanding of English writing as narrowly right or wrong, regardless of context or use. Another student described a similar experience: "They didn't really teach writing ... but they taught you how—when writing was incorrect, I guess."⁹

3 *Developing Writers* Interview 06W13C2ExitEdited.

4 Interview 11W13C3ExitEdited.

5 Interview 01F11C2EntryEdited.

6 Interview 01F11C2ExitEdited.

7 Interview 01F11C2EntryEdited.

8 Interview 11W13C3ExitEdited.

9 Interview 06W13C2ExitEdited.

In answer to the question *If you could tell your teachers one thing about writing or how to teach writing better, what would you tell them?*, another student evoked misconceptions (a) and (c): “I’m big on grammar, so make sure you use the proper grammar, word choices, stuff like that.”¹⁰ In answer to the same question, another student emphasized misconception (b), noting, “I know some students do struggle with grammar and simple things like that.”¹¹ A related misconception separates grammar from structure and ideas, as though grammar has only to do with more superficial choices. A representative interview statement was: “I found that the best classes that I had were where they said, ‘We want none of your comments to be about grammar. We want them all to be about structure and the flow of ideas.’”¹²

But what if the structure and flow of ideas were clearly connected to grammar, and this kind of language knowledge could help us understand more and discriminate less? In the remainder of this essay, I want to show how rhetorical introductory moves and associated linguistic cues can be analyzed in diverse writing—and how analyzing them can help us demonstrate linguistic equality and support rhetorical agency.

THE MOTIVATION, PART 2: EXPLAINING MOVES AND WHY THEY MATTER

EXPLAINING INTRODUCTORY MOVES

John Swales investigated introductory rhetorical moves in academic research articles, and Gere and colleagues analyzed them in early college student writing (“Local Assessment”). As described in *Genre Analysis*, the first move focuses on “establishing a territory,” or introducing a topic, whether that be a phenomenon, an existing view, or an area of research (141). For instance, at the start of this essay, I opened with the “good news”—the commitment to inclusion and justice in U.S. writing studies—and cited examples of this research territory.

Swales’ second move focuses on establishing a gap or “niche” in the territory noted in the first move, by noting a lingering question, an absence, or a further explanation (141). For example, in this piece, my second opening move introduces the “bad news”: the relative lack of attention to language itself in calls for linguistic justice in writing studies.

Swales’ third move focuses on “occupying the niche,” by, e.g., offering a new proposal or otherwise clarifying what the unfolding piece of writing will offer as

10 Interview 01F11MEntryEdited.

11 Interview 01F11MExitEdited.

12 Interview 36F12MExitEdited.

a response to the niche noted in the second move (141). In my own essay here, I indicated what this piece of writing aims to do: offer an example of language knowledge in support of linguistic justice. Gere et al.'s analysis of first-year writing found similar introductory moves tailored to the constructed response task in a student placement process (Gere et al., "Local Assessment").

WHY MOVES MATTER

By moving from more general, known territory to a more specific, unknown niche and contribution, introductory moves display writer knowledge and ease readers' cognitive burden. The linguistic cues associated with each move further support writer and reader knowledge, in that they display how sentences relate to one another.

This clarifying value of move patterns helps explain why readers respond positively to them. Research on published academic writing shows that moves are regularly used by writers regardless of discipline (Knight et al.; Suntara and Usaha; Tankó). Studies of student writing show that rhetorical moves correlate to highly-evaluated writing (Aull, *How Students Write*; Gere et al., "Local Assessment"; Swales; Tedick and Mathison). In their "Local Assessment" study, Gere et al. describe introductory moves and cues as meso- and micro-level ways to "define what 'college writing' means in a specific context" (613). In turn, this same knowledge can help us question why these patterns are prevalent, as part of communal justicing that questions conventional writing practices (Gere et al., "Communal Justicing" 395).

In this short chapter, I show how even in a few texts, identifying language patterns can advance linguistic justice in two overlapping ways. One way is that it refuses impressionistic talk about writing by noting what writers actually do with grammar and lexis, not just what people *think* writers do. A second way is that it offers counter training to linguistic miseducation by supporting the practice of descriptive analysis of similarities and differences across diverse writing.

ANALYZING MOVES IN SUPPORT OF LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

As I do in first-year writing courses, I'll start by analyzing Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Should Writers Use They Own English?" This piece does double-duty in my classes—we read it like readers and like writers. As readers, we can learn about linguistic miseducation and its ideological manifestation, the shaming of language variation. As writers, we can analyze Young's cohesive introductory moves and rule-governed lexico-grammatical patterns. Below, I've excerpted parts of the piece for the sake of brevity, and I've labeled the moves where they begin and bolded phrase-level features that help signal the moves.

MOVE ANALYSIS 1: YOUNG, “SHOULD WRITERS USE THEY OWN ENGLISH?”

[Move 1: The territory] Cultural critic Stanley Fish (2009d) **come talkin bout**—in his three-piece *New York Times* “**What Should Colleges Teach?**” suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should “clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world.” **He say** don’t no student have a right to they own language if that language make them “vulnerable to prejudice”; that “it may be true that the standard language is a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students.” (61; alteration in source)

[Move 2: The niche] Lord, lord, lord! **Where do I begin**, cuz this man sho tryin **to take the nation back** to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan try to dismiss race when he speak on language differences. **But** the two be sho nuff intertwined ... And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come sayin that people make theyselves targets for racism if and when they don’t write and speak like he do. **But don’t nobody’s** language, dialect, or style make them ‘vulnerable to prejudice.’ ... (61–62)

[Move 3: Occupying the niche] **To me**, what make these “markings,” i.e., “standard” and “dialect,” problematic, even though I use the designations myself, is that what we call standard English is part of a common language system that include Black English and any other so-called variety of English. **I’m sho not trying to say here** that Black English don’t have some rhetorical and grammatical features that differ from what is termed standard English. **What I’m sayin is** that the difference between the two ain’t as big as some like to imagine (62–63)

In his first move, Young introduces his territory: Stanley Fish’s “What Should Colleges Teach?” As part of this first move, Young summarizes Fish’s argument—that “don’t no student have a right to they own language if that language make them ‘vulnerable to prejudice (61).” Using the linguistic cues “come talkin bout” and “he say” along with the name of Fish’s article (61), Young orients the reader to an existing view, which they might have read before.

Young's second paragraph introduces his second move, identifying the gap in Fish's view, which is that it supports linguistic prejudice. Young uses linguistic cues to highlight that there is a problem, including "Where do I begin"; "take the nation back"; "But" and "But don't nobody's" (61–62). With these countering and negation signals and his explanation, Young uses his second move to lay out the problem in the view identified in the first move, before continuing on to the third move.

I see Young most explicitly begin his third move on the second page of the piece. There, his linguistic cue "To me..." shows a departure between Fish's view and his own (62). He further clarifies his stance with the help of not-this/but-this micro moves: "I'm sho not tryin to say here" and "What I'm sayin is" (63).

With these introductory moves, Young provides a good example of how writers can go from introducing an existing view, to noting a problem with it, to addressing the problem, in that order. To do so, the writer has to identify a general entry point, a specific lingering or concerning idea within that topic, and a particular contribution the writer will make. This writing knowledge, in turn, leads the reader step-wise from what might be more familiar information to newer information.

Along with these common informational writing moves, Young's piece illustrates other systematic patterns in English: grammatical patterns common across varieties of written English, including subject-verb-object order—e.g., "He say don't no student ..." (61), sentences made of one or more independent clause and one or more dependent clause, and morphemes like the -s to make nouns plural—e.g., "teachers" (61). And he uses lexico-grammatical patterns common in the dialect referred to as Black English, like double negation—e.g., "don't no student have" (61), the contraction "ain't" (63), third person singular zero—e.g., "he say" (61), and g-dropping—e.g., "talkin" (61).

MOVE ANALYSIS 2: FISH, "WHAT SHOULD COLLEGES TEACH?"

Fish's own piece, to which Young responds, is similarly patterned; it too includes the three introductory moves, linguistic cues to signal the moves, and rule-governed lexico-grammatical choices.

[Move 1: The territory] **A few years ago**, when I was grading papers for a graduate literature course, **I became alarmed** at the inability of my students to write a clean English sentence. They could manage for about six words and then, almost invariably, the syntax (and everything else) fell apart. **I became even more alarmed** when I remembered that these same students were instructors in the college's composition program.

[Move 2: The gap] What, I wondered, could possibly be going on in their courses?

I decided to find out, and asked to see the lesson plans of the 104 sections. I read them and found **that only four** emphasized training in the craft of writing

[Move 3: Occupying the niche] As I learned more about the world of composition studies, **I came to the conclusion** that unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are **a sham**, and I advised administrators **to insist** that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and **nothing else**.

Fish uses his first move to introduce the territory—"the inability of my students to write a clean English sentence"—with linguistic cues to signal the move—e.g., "a few years ago," "I became alarmed," and "even more alarmed." His second move notes a problem—that students aren't being taught "the craft of writing" in composition courses—with cues that signal a perplexing problem—e.g., "What ... could possibly be going on," and "only." Finally, in his third move, Fish notes what he will contribute, his "insist[ence] that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else."

Also like Young, Fish uses grammatical patterns common across varieties of written English, including subject-verb-object order—e.g., "I became alarmed ...," sentences made of one or more clauses with subjects and verbs, and morphemes like the -s to make nouns plural—e.g., "teachers." Fish likewise uses systematic lexico-grammatical features of English, from a dialect referred to as standardized English, including single negation—e.g., "was not their focus," the contraction "aren't," third person singular -s—e.g., "one argument says," and undropped -g—e.g., "training."

Finally, to apply this same attention to student and STEM writing, we'll look to Gere's *Developing Writers* to analyze a student introduction from an upper-division mathematics course.

MOVE ANALYSIS 3: CELESTE, WRITING SAMPLE 4, "LONG-TERM CARE INSURANCE FOR ALL ACTIVE EMPLOYEES"

[Move 1: Establishing the territory] Long-term care (LTC) insurance provides protection against the inability to finance costs for long-term care which, according to the Society of Actuaries (2012), is "the overall term for care provided to an incapacitated person over a prolonged period." Such care **encompasses** care provided to individuals who cannot perform activities of daily living (ADLs) **such as** dressing, bathing, and eating. It **also includes** care provided to individuals who

need help with instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs) **including** preparing meals and shopping. (2)

[Move 2: Establishing the niche] **These types of care are covered** by long-term care insurance **if they are provided** in places such as private homes and assisted-living facilities among others (Society of Actuaries, 2012). (2)

[Move 3: Occupying the niche] **This paper will discuss both the merits and drawbacks of** purchasing long-term care (LTC) insurance by highlighting the common issues of contention in discussions of LTC insurance. **Ultimately, the paper will** compare and contrast two opposing positions in the LTC insurance debate regarding whether all active employees should purchase the insurance. **To do so, the paper will present** the perspectives of both proponents and opponents of LTC insurance on three main issues, particularly, LTC insurance cost, plan design, and market conditions. (2)

In this brief student introduction, Celeste includes the three moves, just as do Young and Fish. Celeste's opening move names the topic of long-term care, defining this "overall term" and signaling explanatory illustrations—e.g., "encompasses," "such as," and "also includes" (2). Her second move identifies an area for further explanation within this topic—coverage and what it depends on—e.g., "are covered" and "if they are provided" (2). Finally, her third move occupies the niche, addressing how the paper will further explain the "merits and drawbacks" of insurance coverage (2). Celeste also includes a map of the paper in her third move, using the linguistic cues "this paper will discuss" and "ultimately, the paper will present" (2). In addition to these informational move patterns, Celeste uses lexico-grammatical patterns common in what is called standardized English, including single negation and third person singular verbs—e.g., "encompasses" (2).

CLOSING REMARKS

Different though they are, these three introductions offer a clear if brief illustration of the patterned nature of writing. They illustrate Young's claim—the difference between language varieties "ain't as big as some like to imagine" (63)—and they also showcase systematic differences. In analyzing such similarities and differences, we build our language knowledge, concretely identifying and describing what language is doing. We resist abstract ideas about language, since even sufficiently critical abstract ideas about language will not overturn a

language regulation paradigm in which we find language discrimination and little language knowledge.

To upend language discrimination, we need to replace language ignorance and hierarchy with critical attention to language beliefs and language knowledge. Then, we compile systematic evidence of the equally rule-governed and responsive nature of all shared language varieties. Then, we value (the study of) language variation, support language beliefs that advance fairness and equity, and empower language users with rhetorical agency. In other words, then we use language knowledge in support of linguistic justice. This is my hope for how we carry on Gere's ideas, data, and legacy into the future of writing studies.

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