

English Power: A Movement that Shapes *Americans*

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Prologue

My paper argues of the presence of the culture of power that Standard English possesses in our American Society and how hazardous it is to our ethnic backgrounds individually and nationally. My paper is brimming with personal experiences (mine and others), italicized words, slang usage, and questions, which are all disliked by the culture of power and goes against what I was taught a superb argumentative essay should look like. My methods are used to ask you to realize some aspects in life that we take for granted and accept as the "truth," also it is used to keep my argument flowing relating some of the questions to the next set of facts. I intentionally broke the rules to prove a point that superb papers can still exist with the absence of obedience to the rules of English and grammar. In a way, it is my way of protesting against and lessens the power of Standard English in my writing and in my "voice."

I was born in Manila, Philippines, but I was brought over to Seattle, Washington when I was only 8 months old. My mom raised me by herself until my dad came here from the Philippines when I was 5. My mom was fairly new to this *land of opportunity*, and the only culture she knew of at that time was her Filipino culture, which was deeply rooted and cultivated for 25 years in her. With that my mom raised me with her culture still fresh on her tongue. I was raised in Tagalog. Because my dad was still in the Philippines I visited him often and in his province of Iloilo, they spoke Visayan and Ilonggo. Therefore, I was taught to also know

and speak Visayan and Ilonggo. Life was fine and dandy. Then I went to school.

Don't get me wrong, I knew English as well as Tagalog, but I still had an accent. I was too young to be embarrassed of my "speech impediment," so I don't remember being an outcast because of my accent, but I do know that I did not have that accent in 1st grade. Looking back now I realized that once I entered school, I gradually stopped speaking Tagalog frequently in school because only a couple of my classmates understood and in home because my parents stopped speaking to me in Tagalog. I wonder why they stopped. Now I can't speak Tagalog or Visayan or Ilonggo, but I do know plenty of words found in the Webster's Unabridged English Dictionary. *Why is that I lost the tongue I was raised in and use the tongue that was implicated in me (English)? Why did my parents not help me find the lost one? What is it about English that made me know it more than my own ethnic language? Is this bad?*

Standard English is my dominant language now simply because it was forced upon me, not physically, but it was omnipresent, I had to know English in order to do anything. Wow, I know, "forced", "had," "anything," pretty aggressive, but it was simply because it has power to do so, namely the culture of power (introduced by a renowned African-American author, Lisa Delpit). Culture of power is the power to appear natural and acceptable; it is the practice of domination, but I will go more in depth about it in the latter. In this essay, I will give you the 4-1-1 on basic ideas and definitions that are applied throughout this essay. Then I will show you the presence of the culture of power within Standard English. Finally I will unmask to how Standard English puts the culture of power to play in our daily lives. By the end of this essay, you will see how Standard English's power is dangerous to our American culture.

Standard English is mostly identified with America because that is where it is most enforced. Identity and language

walk hand in hand because it is a form of identification of one's culture. Therefore, identity, language, and culture are related because in order to be identified according to culture one must establish their identity through language. Culture, in this case, is a collection of identities. Everything is socially transmitted in forms of patterns of behavior, thoughts, and practices. Language does not necessarily reflect from where your heritage was formed, but is reflecting your concourse in life, the culture that made you, that is why we in America speak English, but *what is an American? And English is not from America, but why do we speak it?* Standard English was brought forth by the British way back in the day when the British decided that this land was uncivilized and that the savages did not know how to put it to use. They were the ones with the power due to wealth then, therefore they had more power over the French and the Spanish who also claimed land on America. To make themselves more elite, they spoke English to communicate with only each other and leave the Spanish, French, and Native Americans oblivious, therefore gaining power over them. This concept still proves true today, as proven by Mike Long, and African American writer, in his essay "Ebonics, Language, and Power."

Governments and elites understand the gate keeping opportunities afforded them by support of a "standard" variety as a requirement for access to power, too. "The elites speak the 'official' state language or the 'standard' variety of a language—in the present case, 'Standard English'—which they made official or standard; the oppressed groups are decreed by the same elites to speak a less acceptable or unacceptable language or a socially stigmatized variety of the same language" (221).

Consequently, these other groups felt that they needed to also learn English and acquire their behavior too in order to gain the power that they have. Standard English gained its power through history and now appears to be the "natural" language to speak in order to be respected and successful in America. Standard

English is the dominant language of America because it proposes the idea that it provides more social mobility (which later on will lead to success and opportunities), it unifies the nation by conformity and communication, and it is an ideology that stuck through history and has connotations of success with wealth and power. However, Standard English is not American' it has been adopted, with exemption of the Native Americans. Only the Native Americans have right to this land, ye their language us not the dominant language. *Is it fair that other cultures languages are looked down upon, even though these cultures help make up America? Is it fair that only Standard English receives merit?*

Barry Hatch, mayor of Monterey Park, CA, exclaims, "Give up your culture and adopt American ways, or go back from whence you came. Speak English or you will be unwelcome here" as a reaction to the increase of Chinese accommodations in his city (Chinese signs, books, magazines) (Crawford 8). These people Hatch points at (not only Chinese but to all non-English speakers) cannot help their current situation because, like my mom, they are comfortable with the only culture they know, the culture they grew up with. Crawford states in his essay, "those who prize their ethnicity may cling to their native tongues in spite of—sometimes because of—their lower social standings. Their language remained part of their ethnicity not only because they had less to gain by learning English, but because, 'unburdened' by economic opportunities, their family structures remained more stable" (Crawford 22). Unfortunately, a person who has English as a second language does not excel to succession as quickly as those who have English as a first language. This is another example of Standard English's culture of power. What is this culture of power? How do you recognize it?

Delpit's culture of power contains 5 elements: issues of power enacted in classrooms, codes or rules for participating in power, these rules are reflections of the rules of those who have power, being told explicitly the rules makes acquiring power

easier, and those with power are least aware of their power as opposed to those who have less power who are more aware of its existence. In the following, I will illustrate to you how culture of power is applied through Standard English.

Standard English is the main language used in classrooms, which exceptions of foreign language classes. We are taught “proper” usage of the language, proper grammar, and how to apply that in our everyday writing, like this paper for example, I would not write sentences like, “In American, Ridiculous car stereo only Standard English is” for “Standard English as the only language in America is ridiculous.” We are taught to write and speak English in class too (again unless it is foreign language class). Gloria Anzaldua protests against the culture of power in this way by code-switching in her essay, which is switching her writing language from Standard English, to Chicano Spanish, to Spanglish. We receive good merits academically if we follow what we learn in class on how to apply Standard English. In order to receive good merits in life in general, there are many rules to follow for Standard English. Outside of the classroom we are taught through other people’s experience that we need to know Standard English to achieve anything, like to succeed in school, to get a job, to manage job positions, and to find housing. One example of English needed in these life situations is in Crawford’s essay again. In Elizabeth, New Jersey, a city whose residents are 30 percent Hispanic, the mayor instituted a “Speak-English-Only” rule for city workers while performing their duties “[because] it was discourteous for City employees to converse in other than English in front of other City employees” (209). Rule: Learn English to get a job.

Basically, we learn that assimilation to the American culture, which includes adopting English, is the best way to live the American ideology of yearning for the best things in life, always better than the next person’s. Now, where do these rules come from? The rules come from those who have succeeded and institutions with power already, such as the government. If you

look at all the successful, wealthy, respected people of America, they speak proper Standard English, which gives them the appearance of being elite and highly educated. These are the rules from those who abide by “whiteness,” those who follow the domination life of white supremacy because English is a Eurocentric language which is white and was used in the past to dominate. Again it is not based on race because in actuality the majority of white people do not even practice “whiteness,” it is the behavior of the people (regardless of race or ethnicity) that determines their allegiance to “whiteness.” However, even though these rules are influenced by whiteness and we abide by it, we still cannot be called white supremacist because we do not follow that lifestyle of domination, it is only one aspect of it, the language that we follow.

The rules we learn do not fall naturally upon us on the day we were born, we were nurtured. We had to be told what they are, whether it is verbally, by our own experience, or other people’s experience. Relating back to the example of needing to speak English to get a job, future employees and current employees were plainly told by the company’s rules that they had to know and speak English, if not, they are out of a job. Also, other countries realize the importance of English to success in America, so even these foreign countries teach English in their core subjects so that when their people come to our country they are easily assimilated through language. Unlike us, we teach foreign language as an option. For example, the Philippines, there are schools in Philippines that have English class for each grade and a monetary punishment for kids who spoke their dialects on school grounds. The culture of power leads us to believe that we need these rules for the usage of Standard English to gain power and the more we abide by the rules the faster we gain power.

The ones who lack that power are more conscious of its existence as opposed to those who already have it, for them, it is their “natural” way of life. Those with the power right now cease

to recognize their advantage, their privilege. They would look at my argument and believe it to be preposterous. Why? They are not faced with the problem. They do not have to learn English, nor do they have to drop their prior language in order to, but that is what those with less power have to do. I, along with the many who used to speak their ethnic language, see a problem. We see that, true, speaking Standard English will make us socially mobile, but why do we have to? *Why do we have to disconnect our roots in order to grow on different soil?*

All of us fall victim in culture of power, because like the devil, it tricks us into thinking it is not there. We accept it as truth, and never contest it. Why do we taunt those who do not speak English well? It is our fault too that the culture of power became so powerful through Standard English. If a group of Asian guys were gathered and spoke their language outside of the international district, we, the English speakers, refer to them as boaters. Speaking anything other than Standard English has a negative connotation to it in the “real” world because according to the culture of power, without the knowledge of Standard English we are not educated nor will we succeed. Think about it, how powerful is Standard English actually because there are those in poverty who also speak English? So does speaking Standard English really equal success or is that just what the culture or power wants us to believe? Uniqueness and diversity is valued in our American culture, so why can’t we keep the unique qualities of our culture that makes America diverse and makes America, America? Standard English gaining this absolute power will decompose us of our “cultural” make-up as Americans, therefore losing out ethnic pasts and traditions that enrich the American culture as a whole.

Works Cited

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