

Yale

Linguistic Prejudice: Revealing our implicit biases about language

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What do we mean by the term *linguistic prejudice*?

Ascribing negative (or even positive) properties to people because of how they sound, or based on whether or not they use “proper grammar.”



Why are we here?

Linguistic prejudice can have **serious detrimental effects** on individuals.

Linguistic prejudice is **usually implicit**, so we can contribute to the problem without being aware of it.

People often associate linguistic features with individuals'

- intelligence

- honesty

- work ethic

- motivation

- education

- attractiveness

Goals for the talk

Raise awareness of our implicit biases and the flawed basis for them

Show that linguistic prejudice applies to

- people who speak with an **accent** that departs from the “standard”

- people who use **grammar** that departs from the “standard”

Highlight some detrimental effects of linguistic prejudice

- in the housing market

- in the justice system

- in educational settings

Begin a conversation about what we can do about linguistic prejudice

Attitudes toward
speakers with
different accents

Attitudes toward a Southern accent



American Tongues
(1988)

Again, a Southern accent

“Gov. Clinton, you attended Oxford University in England and Yale Law School in the Ivy League, two of the finest institutions of learning in the world. So how come you still talk like a hillbilly?”

— Mike Royko, “Opinion” column, October 11, 1992



Bill Clinton

The puzzle

Two simple truths about human languages:

1. Every language comes in different varieties.
2. Every language changes over time.

Why is there hostility toward certain varieties?

The puzzle

Are some pronunciations or intonation patterns inherently more correct than others?

Why are certain pronunciations considered “standard”?

What determines whether a departure from the standard is quaint, prestigious, or “bad”?

The key to the puzzle...

There is no inherent value associated with certain sounds.

Whether we consider a certain feature prestigious, quaint, or stigmatized is a reflection of our attitudes toward the speakers who have that feature.

In other words, a judgment of a linguistic feature is a hidden judgment of a group of people — it is a reflection of our social biases.

An example: *r*-lessness

Consider an *r* sound before a consonant or at the end of a word, as in *park* or *car*.

Is it inherently good to pronounce the *r*?

Is it inherently bad to leave it unpronounced? (*r*-lessness)

An example: *r*-lessness

From a linguistic point of view: no.

From a social point of view: it depends when and where:

		
today	today	early 20 th century
STANDARD	NONSTANDARD	STANDARD
high prestige	low prestige	high prestige

An example: r -lessness



In sum

Whether a feature of language is evaluated as prestigious or is stigmatized is independent from the linguistic feature itself.

It is determined by social factors, and it varies depending on time and place.

So, negative reactions to a Southern accent (for example) are a reflection of a negative attitude toward Southerners.

Value judgments about language reflect social bias.

*Attitudes toward
speakers with different
grammatical structures*

A language's grammar exhibits variation and change

There is variation at any particular point in time:

- (1) Q: Do you have a copy of the book?
 - a. A: I should do. (British English)
 - b. A: I should. (American English or British English)
- (2) a. This film has monsters in. (British English)
 - b. This film has monsters in it. (American English or British English)

A language's grammar exhibits variation and change

There is variation over time, which leads to change.

Passive participles in certain contexts were once condemned:

(6) The trunks **were being carried** down.

In favor of:

(7) “The clock struck ten while the trunks **were carrying** down.”

(1818, Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 155; cited in Maling 2006: 201)

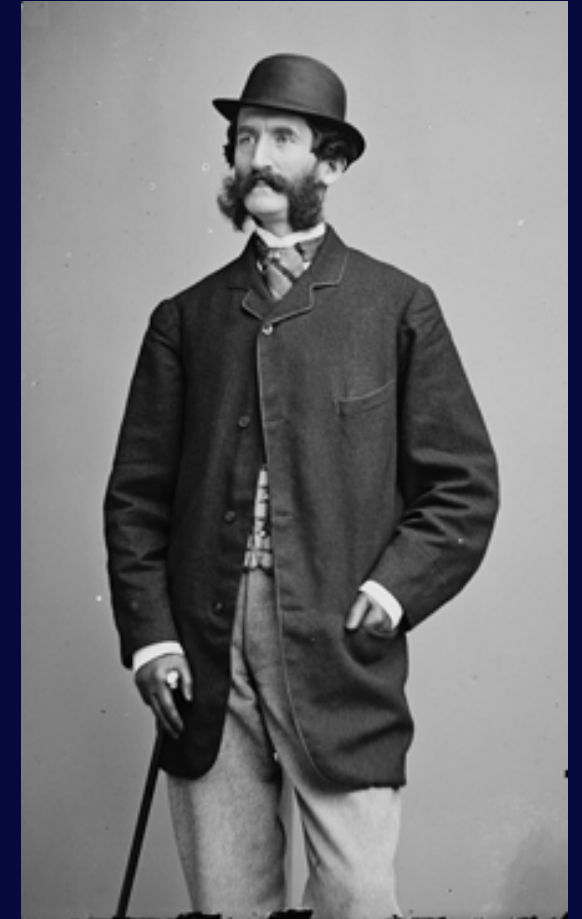
A language's grammar exhibits variation and change

(8) The trunks **were being carried** down. (new form)

(9) The trunks **were carrying** down. (old form)

“R. Grant White, in *Words and their Uses* (1871: 336) declares that the new idiom ‘is the **most incongruous usage of words and ideas that ever attained respectable usage in any civilized language**’ (cited by Visser 1973: 2427).”

(Maling 2006: 202n1)



The Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (YGDP)

In order to study variation in the ways that speakers of North American English structure their words and sentences, we:

- conduct large-scale surveys asking speakers to rate the acceptability of sentences,

- map the results of those surveys geographically,

- conduct statistical tests taking geography and other social variables into account, and

- look for theoretically significant linguistic correlations.

Our primary goal is to understand variation between individual speakers.

The Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (YGDP)

Some examples of sentences we study:

(10) Here's you a piece of pizza.

(11) We don't any of us need anything.

(12) She has her a new boyfriend.

(13) I'll be right back with you some tea.

(14) Do you have yet to visit your grandmother?

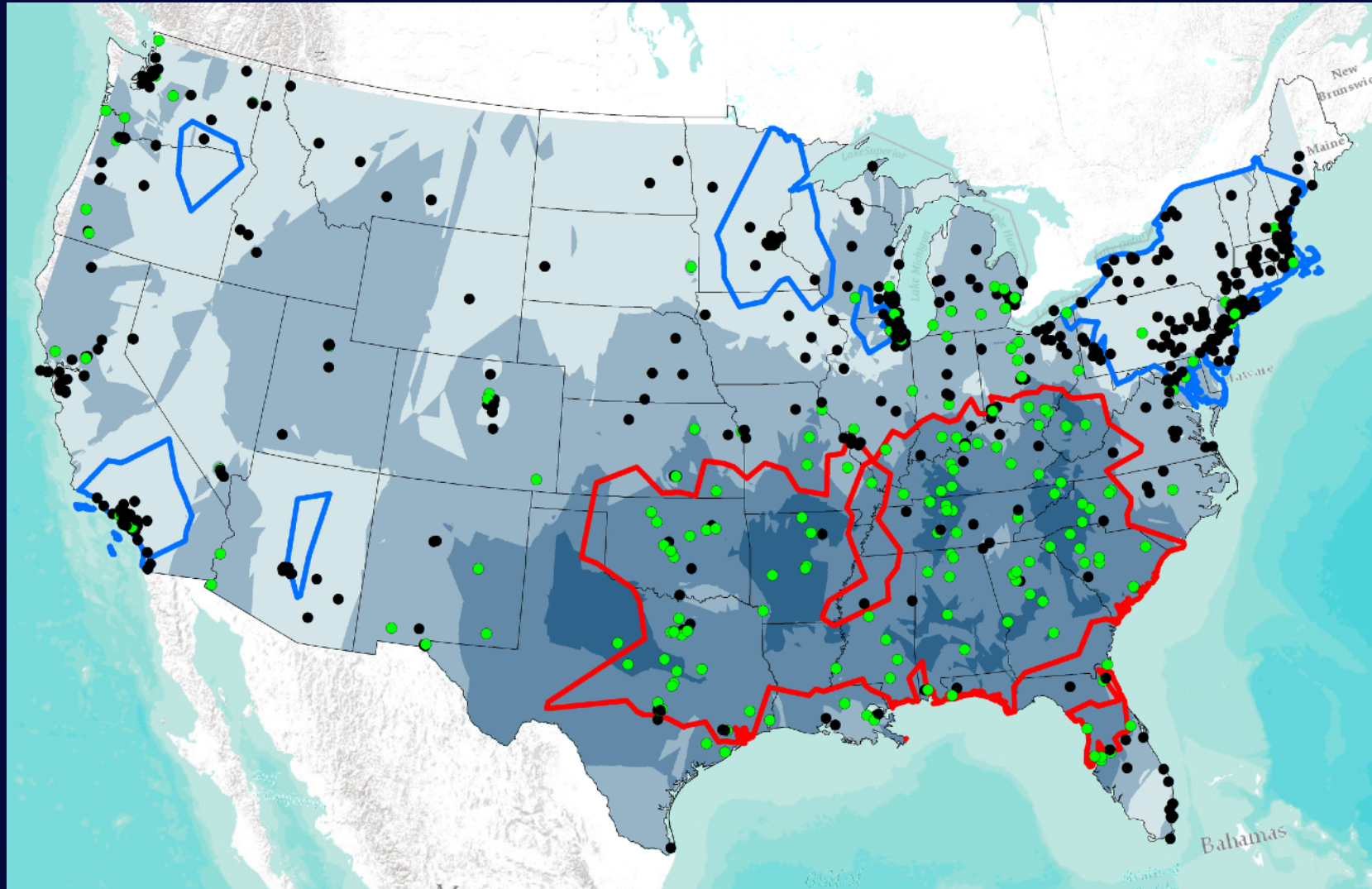
(15) I am done dinner.

(16) The cat wants fed.

(17) Bill can touch the ceiling, and so can't I.

(18) He fast in everything he do.

Here's you a piece of pizza.



Positive *anymore*

Negative *anymore*:

(19) It never snows here **anymore**.

Positive *anymore*:

(20) Fish is expensive **anymore**.

(21) The traffic on the beltway is horrible **anymore**.

(22) He has plenty of free time, so he exercises a lot **anymore**.

Positive *anymore*

Members of the *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1975) panel (including poets, novelists, journalists, and editors) condemned this use of *anymore* as

“barbaric patois” (John Ciardi),

“uneducated” (Isaac Asimov),

“nonce slang” (Willard Espy),

“a barbarism” (Red Smith),

and similar terms: “nonsensical,” “confusing,” “illogical,” “unsure immigrant speech,” “illiterate and without meaning,” “faintly nauseating,” “lower class.”

People react strongly to nonstandard language

“I **hate** southern accents and reading some of these made me want to **puke.**”

“I think this was probably about bias toward the under-educated. I have to say, a lot of the speech depicted **bothers me** a lot—when anyone uses it.”

People attribute negative stereotypes to people based on their language

“So much sounded like **white trash**”

“**caveman** speak i typically rated low”

“Seems very **southern** and makes me feel a bit **gross** to hear. I would not want to be associated with a person who speaks this way.”

“This group [of sentences] had more “**urban**” slang.”

“Many of [these sentences] are common **on the streets.**”

People often assume that nonstandard language implies laziness or lack of intelligence

“I know you’re not looking for grammatically correct English—but that IS what you should speak in formal and informal contexts. SLANG is informal. None of this is slang. This is **bad** PA Dutch sentence construction showing people’s **laziness** or that they’re too **stupid** to learn English.”

People assume that there is an objectively correct way to speak and all else is a perversion

“Perhaps I was raised in a home where proper sentences were spoken because most of these sentences did NOT roll off my tongue. Also my most **illiterate** employee does not **misuse** the English language that poorly.”

“I feel like a prig for some of my answers, but it just bugs me when people speak in a way that’s so far removed from **actual English**. I use slang all the time too, but come on. Geez.”

“I have never see such a collection of improper grammar from a supposedly college educated group. My head hurts. My children learned quickly from their **mistakes**. They learned their mistakes from their **hillbilly** friends, who learned grammar from my children. I hope that’s where you got this **trash**.”

But what is the ‘perversion’?

The grammatical system of a language is not monolithic.

There are subtle differences between the grammars of different individuals and different groups.

Some of these grammatical systems are looked down upon for reasons that have to do with the structure of our society, not with the language per se.

There is nothing illogical about Double Negatives

Double Negatives:

(23) There ain't no justice. (August Wilson's *Two trains running*, 1992)

(24) They won't give you nothing.

(25) I didn't see no one.

People have called double negatives illogical, and attributed all sorts of negative properties to speakers who use them

But are they illogical?

There is nothing illogical about Double Negatives

They are a form of agreement, a property of human language that allows marking of a certain feature in more than one place.

Consider gender in Spanish:

Una casa blanca

a house white

'a white house'

Un perro blanco

a dog white

'a white dog'

There is nothing illogical about Double Negatives

Double Negatives are present in many of the world's languages:

“I didn't see anyone/no one.” (English)

(26) **Non** ho visto **nessuno**. (Italian)

(27) Je **n'**ai vu **personne**. (French)

(28) **No** he visto a **nadie**. (Spanish)

(29) **No** he vist **ningu**. (Catalan)

(30) **Não** vi **ninguém**. (Portuguese)

In fact, double negatives used to be standard form in earlier stages of English.

There is nothing illogical about Double Negatives

It is true that speakers who use Double Negatives are not using the rules of prescriptive grammar.

But why do some people have a visceral reaction why they hear Double Negatives? Why don't they think they're okay, or simply colloquial, or even quaint?

Because of the class of speakers normally associated with them:

- African American speakers

- working-class speakers of all races

African American English has a sophisticated grammar

African American English (especially in its vernacular varieties) encodes rich meaning distinctions in its verbal system in ways that Standard English doesn't.

(31) She in her office.

'She is in her office right now.'

(32) She be in her office.

'She is usually in her office.'

This does not reflect the inability to use the verb *be* in its inflected forms.

Rather, it expresses an important piece of information.

In sum

It is normal for a language to exhibit variation in its grammatical system.

There is no reason to look down upon such differences: expressing negation more than once (Double Negatives) and marking aspectual distinctions is what grammatical systems do.

The negative reaction we have to certain departures from the standard reflects a reaction toward speakers of those grammatical systems.

Linguistic prejudice
is detrimental

Three examples

In the housing market

In the justice system

In educational settings

Linguistic profiling and housing discrimination

You had me at “hello”

People are very good at identifying someone’s ethnicity based on how they sound (Purnell et al. 1999).

Studies such as Baugh (2003) have shown that landlords/sellers screen out unwanted applicants on the basis of their accent.

This is discriminatory profiling: using language as a proxy for race, class, or national origin.

Linguistic prejudice in the justice system

Linguistic prejudice in the justice system

“Vernacular speakers are often misunderstood or unfairly assailed and misjudged in court.”

(Rickford & King 2016: 952)

Rachel Jeantel's Testimony

A friend of Trayvon Martin, Jeantel was on the phone with him when he was killed by George Zimmerman in 2012.

At age 19, she was the prosecution's star witness in Zimmerman's 2013 trial.

Jeantel claimed that Martin was retreating from Zimmerman.

Zimmerman, in contrast, claimed that Martin posed a threat to him.

(Rickford & King 2016)



Rachel Jeantel's Testimony

Jeantel testified for nearly 6 hours, but her testimony was disregarded, and Zimmerman was acquitted.

“No one mentioned Jeantel in [16+ hour] jury deliberations. Her testimony played no role whatsoever in their decision” (Juror Maddy, reported in Bloom 2014: 148).

(Rickford & King 2016)



Rachel Jeantel's Testimony

Why was such lengthy testimony by the star witness disregarded?

Because of the vernacular variety of English that she used in testifying (displaying features of African American Vernacular English and Caribbean English).

Jurors said that they found her “not credible” and “hard to understand” (Juror B37).

(Rickford & King 2016)



Linguistic prejudice in educational settings

Linguistic prejudice and comprehension (Rubin 1992)

Linguistic prejudice can lead a hearer to perceive an accent, even when there is none: “accent hallucination.”

Participants listened to a tape-recorded lecture while being presented with a slide photograph representing the instructor:

some participants saw a photograph of a Caucasian lecturer,
others a picture of an Asian lecturer.

Linguistic prejudice and comprehension (Rubin 1992)

The recording was from a single speaker: “a doctoral student in speech communication, a native speaker of English raised in central Ohio, who was well regarded by her own university students for especially effective and clear classroom delivery.”

Linguistic prejudice and comprehension (Rubin 1992)

They were then asked to rate on a scale:

Perception of ethnicity (Caucasian...Asian)

Perception of accent (American...Foreign)

Evaluation of teaching competence (Effective...Poor)

Subjects were given a test of listening comprehension.

Linguistic prejudice and comprehension (Rubin 1992)

Accent was perceived to be more foreign and less standard when the participants were shown the picture of an Asian instructor.

Comprehension was lower for groups exposed to the photo of an Asian instructor and higher for groups exposed to the picture of a Caucasian instructor.

Linguistic prejudice and its implications

What does this mean for an academic institution?

Are instructors who are not Caucasian unfairly perceived as hard to understand?

Are students, faculty, staff and administrators who are not Caucasian considered less knowledgeable, competent, or scholarly?

What does this mean for society more generally?

Do these perceptions negatively impact people in the workplace?

Do they impact our ability to be open and fair toward people who are not Caucasian?

Linguistic prejudice and its implications

In the K-12 school system, linguistic prejudice can damage our children.

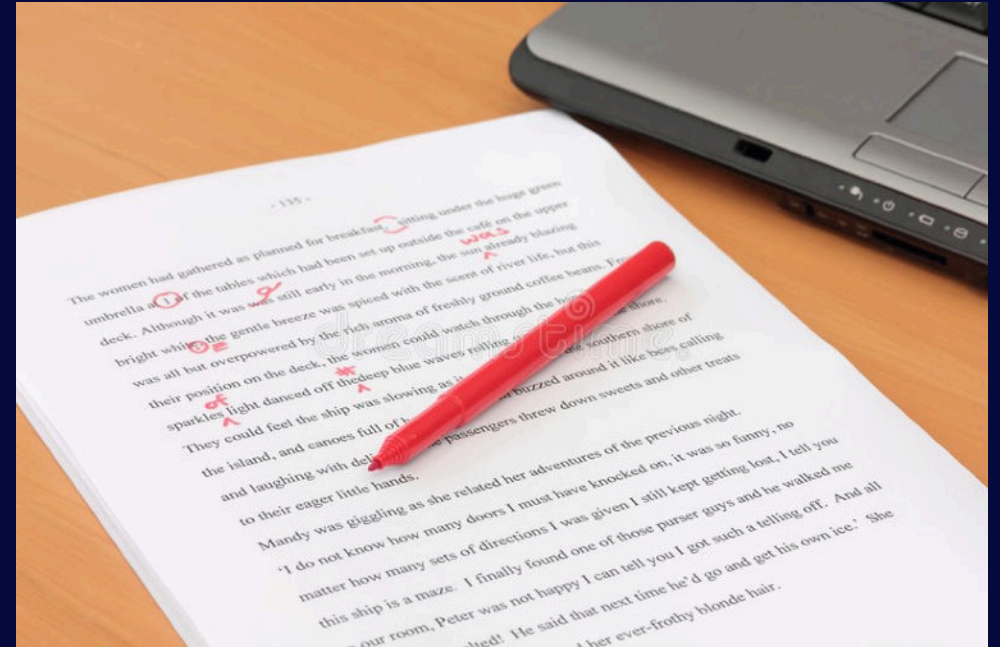
Those who speak a nonstandard variety at home can be perceived as less smart and capable.

They might be expected to perform less well and put in less challenging classes.

Schools and language inferiority

“[Teachers] may interpret ‘errors’ students make in the standard dialect of education as carelessness or laziness, rather than a reflection of their [native dialect], and develop negative attitudes towards these students.”

(Siegel 2012: 223)



Schools and language inferiority

“Teachers may also equate the lack of knowledge of the standard dialects as a lack of intelligence, and this can lead to lower expectations and the self-fulfilling prophecy of poorer student performance. [...]



Schools and language inferiority

“such negative attitudes may be internalised by the students, affecting their own self-image, or rejected by them, causing them to withdraw from participation in the education system. In both cases, the consequence is poor school performance.”

(Siegel 2010: 223)



What we can and cannot do

Why don't they (or we) just switch to the standard?

A common misconception is that language is different from other kinds of social markers, in that we can choose to speak differently.

So we are led to wonder: “If not speaking the standard dialect can have such a negative effect, why don't we all just speak the standard dialect?”

Why don't they (or we) just switch to the standard?

In fact it's not so simple.

Numerous studies have shown that it is very, very difficult to acquire a second dialect, maybe even harder than learning a second language (Siegel 2010: 134),

The optimal age for learning a second dialect is 7 years and younger. For people ages 14 and over, it becomes very difficult (Siegel 2010: 219).

Why is it so hard to learn a second dialect?

One reason is that two dialects are very similar, so it is hard to pick out their distinguishing features.

For example, do *ferry* and *fairy* sound the same to you? If so, try to practice distinguishing them...

“We should ferry the fairies to the fairy-holding ferry”



Why is it so hard to learn a second dialect?

Now try the same thing with *merry/marry/Mary*.

“I’d be merry if I could marry
Mary in a merry ceremony.”

Learning a second dialect requires both the teacher and the student to have a very sophisticated understanding of the grammar of both the original dialect and the target dialect.



But what about actors?

Hugh Laurie has us fooled. His native dialect is British English but on television, he is an utterly convincing American.

If Hugh Laurie can do it, why can't the rest of us?



But what about actors?

“It is much more difficult to acquire another dialect to the extent that it can be maintained in everyday use.”

(Siegel 2010: 219)



But what about actors?

“Some actors have difficulty sustaining their dialect imitations even through the duration of their performance.” (Siegel 2010: 65-66)



Why don't they (or we) just switch to the standard?

Many people have limited access to the standard due to systemic inequality and segregation.

There may be benefits to using a nonstandard variety as a marker of solidarity and in-group identity. In some environments, using the standard would seem artificial.

What *can* we do?

What can we do?

Identify our own biases (a lifelong project!).

When you find yourself criticizing someone's language (accent, grammar), ask yourself what you're really criticizing.

The more you learn about other language varieties, the better equipped you are to catch not only yourself but others behaving in prejudiced ways.

Check out the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project website at <http://ygdproject.yale.edu>!

What can we do?

In addition to not putting people down, we can also encourage pride in all linguistic varieties (accents, dialects, languages).

This does not mean that we do not see a role and value of standard English in our society; it simply means that we also appreciate varieties of English that depart from the standard and we respect them and the speakers who speak them.

What can we do?

“On the basis of our keen auditory skills as a species, I believe that linguistic profiling will exist as long as human language exists. The challenge to Americans and our fellow citizens elsewhere is to **have wisdom, patience, and sufficient tolerance of others whose linguistic backgrounds differ substantially from our own.**”

(Baugh 2003: 166)

Conclusion

Variation has always been part of language, and languages are always changing.

Value judgments of language forms are often rooted in social bias, rather than rational or linguistic assessments.

It is not necessarily easy or even possible...

- to avoid or eliminate these implicit biases

- to acquire a second dialect

By cultivating an awareness of our implicit linguistic biases, we can work to counteract the many negative effects they may have in various aspects of our lives, on and off campus.

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