

English with an Accent

Language, ideology, and
discrimination in the United
States

Rosina Lippi-Green



English with an Accent

Language, ideology, and discrimination
in the United States

Rosina Lippi-Green



London and New York

First published 1997

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1997 Rosina Lippi-Green

Typeset in Times Ten by Florencetype, Stoodleigh, Devon

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Lippi-Green, Rosina

English with an accent: language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States/Rosina Lippi-Green.

1. English language – Social aspects – United States. 2. English language – Political aspects – United States. 3. English language – Variation – United States. 4. Speech and social status – United States. 5. Language and culture – United States. 6. Language policy – United States. 7. Discrimination – United States.

I. Title.

PE2808.8.L57 1997

306.4'4'0973–dc20

96-33234

ISBN 0-415-11476-4 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-11477-2 (pbk)

*In memory of my father, Arturo Lippi
1911–1985
who had an accent that I couldn't hear*

The work of an intellectual is not to mould the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions and . . . to participate in the formation of a political will (where he has a role as a citizen to play).

Michel Foucault, "The concern for truth" (1989)

Preface

By almost anybody's modern US standards, I have no accent. Because of the English I speak, the hurtful and exclusionary practices you will read about in this book have never been directed at me.

In fact, objectively, I do have an accent. My English tells anybody who wants to listen to me who I am: I am a white woman of middle age who has lived most of her life in the heart of the country, in the midwest. By fortunate circumstance, I had a longer and more exclusive education than most people have, which has also influenced my accent – because it took me away from the midwest, primarily, but also because it put me in social circumstances which were foreign to me, against which I struggled and will always struggle, even as I adjust.

This is a written work, and so it is by virtue not of my accent but of my education that I am granted a voice. For that reason some would say that my authority derives exclusively from privilege. It is true that I cannot claim the authority of personal experience in the matters I am going to describe and discuss, but I can and do claim the authority of careful observation and study, and of interest and participation.

I am taking a chance. My thoughts may be dismissed, my observations put aside. In a time when authorial voices are questioned very closely, I have no credentials which allow me to speak – nor do I wish to speak – for African Americans or Asian Americans. But because I am not a Latina or Lakota Sioux, because I am not from Mobile, the Bronx, Bombay, Singapore, or Nairobi, readers may question my data before ever considering my analysis and conclusions. In that case, I invite them to investigate for themselves before dismissing what I have to say. The purpose of this study is not to answer the questions raised in a definitive way, but to open up a discussion and examination which has been suppressed for too long.

This book is divided into three parts. In the first chapter, I attempt to provide a brief introduction to linguistic facts: empirically won knowledge about the structure and function of language. These facts are crucial to the development of the central arguments of this book. Some of the material presented (for example: that language change is normal, functional,

and inevitable) will evoke emotional responses, because beliefs about the way language should be used are passed down and protected in much the same way that religious beliefs are passed along and cherished. Nevertheless, they are facts, and anyone who is willing to read and consider with an open mind will find enough evidence here, and in other volumes, to establish that clearly.

Once facts are established, I cannot claim that this work is solely a neutral exercise in the presentation of behaviors around language and the analysis of those behaviors. Chapters 2 and 3 explore some of the commonly held myths about language: where they came from, and how they function to specific social ends. Thus questions are raised which have consequence in the real world; I have personal beliefs about how those questions should be resolved. My opinions are informed by careful thought and by research, but they are opinions. To be clear, my analytical framework (presented in Chapter 4) takes as a departure point these positions:

- There is something deeply inequitable and unacceptable about the practice of excluding the few from the privileges of the many on the basis not of what they have to say, but of how they say it.
- The demand that the disempowered assimilate linguistically and culturally to please the empowered is – purely in linguistic terms – an impossibility. For that reason, such demands are misleading, unreasonable, and demeaning.

In Chapter 4 I present a working model of what I call the language subordination process, as well as an analysis of the concept of communication barriers. The purpose of these tools is in part to provide readers with a means to undertake their own critical analysis of language subordination outside the examples provided here.

Parts II and III approach the issue of language and discrimination from complementary angles. In Part II, I explore the way institutions have worked together to interweave a set of ideological practices which effectively limit access to discourse on the grounds of language linked to race, ethnicity, economics, and homeland. In Part III I then step back to look at how specific groups and individuals are affected by the lifelong exposure to institutionalized language ideology. In a case-study approach, I consider how some come to embrace common-sense arguments and perpetuate them, and how others manage to resist.

There is a challenge here for the reader. Can you be objective about language? Can you examine what you think you know about your own language? And more difficult, are you willing to explore why you may be so very protective of common-sense arguments about language which have no demonstrable basis in fact?

This book is about reluctance to acknowledge language for the social construct that it is, and the repercussions of such resistance.

Acknowledgements

It's been a long haul. It is only because I am fortunate in my colleagues, students, family, and friends that this study sees the light of day.

First and foremost I owe a debt to my students, in particular those who signed up for my course on Language and Discrimination without knowing what exactly they were getting into, but who stayed anyway. The classroom discussions of many topics in this book – often loud, sometimes disturbing, but seldom boring – have directed my research and influenced the development of my thought. I am also particularly indebted to those graduate students who worked with me on the Disney analysis pilot project: Carlee Arnette, Jennie Dailey-O'Cain, Rita Simpson, and Matt Varley. Their enthusiasm and energy gave me a sorely needed jump start, and my discussions with them on the difficult points of coding and analysis were invaluable.

In the course of collecting material for this book, I have interviewed people all over the country. While many of them wish to remain anonymous, I am nonetheless very thankful for their candid discussion of sometimes difficult topics. I am also indebted to the librarians at the Margaret Herrick Library Center for Motion Picture Study at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles, and to the staff of the Vanderbilt Television News Archives in Nashville.

I have had excellent research assistance, particularly from Pamela Friedman, Lisa Quiroga, Sonia Unchu Park, and Daniel Brenner. Rita Simpson was a careful and constructive editor of the final draft with many useful and substantive comments; Alicia Beckford read and provided crucial commentary on Chapter 9 while Deborah Minter did the same for Chapter 6.

My colleagues Patrice Beddor, Joe Salmons, Debby Keller-Cohen, Lesley Milroy, and James Milroy have been a constant source of encouragement, providing careful readings and constructive criticism. Jim read the last draft of almost all the chapters and provided very close comments, for which I am especially thankful. In addition, there were other thoughtful readers who provided a lot of material which was especially valuable, precisely because they are not linguists. These include David Karraker,

who will Ever Continue to Resist; Emmy Liston, who brought her fine feel for language to the first chapters; and Jack Whyte, who questioned me closely about turns of phrase which needed more careful attention. The usual disclaimers apply, of course; this is my work and I am ultimately responsible for any infelicities.

Finally I am thankful to my husband, Bill, for his usual patience in the face of my last-minute jitters, and to my daughter Elisabeth for reminding me that her past participles are nobody's business but her own.

Permissions

The author and publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce copyright material:

New York University Press for the extract from “The order of discourse” by Michel Foucault, in *Language and Politics*, edited by Michael Shapiro, 1984;

Verso for the extract from *Ideology: An Introduction* by Terry Eagleton, 1991;

A. P. Watt Ltd on behalf of The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty for the extract from “The stranger,” in *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition*;

The Society of Authors on behalf of the Bernard Shaw Estate for the extract from *Man & Superman* by Bernard Shaw;

Providence Journal-Bulletin for the extract from “The voice of success silences dialect: program helps shed telltale tones” by Bob Kerr, in the *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, April, 1994;

Miami Herald for the Dave Barry quotation in Chapter 10, taken from his column in *Bad Habits*. Dave Barry is a columnist for the *Miami Herald*;

The Prince of Wales’s Press Office for the extract from His Royal Highness’s speech at the presentation of the Thomas Cranmer Schools Prize on 19th December 1995.

The extract from *The Story of English* by McCrum and MacNeil is reprinted by permission of the Peters Fraser & Dunlop Group Ltd. Excerpt from *The Color Purple*, copyright © 1982 by Alice Walker, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company.

While the publishers have made every effort to contact copyright holders of material used in this volume, they would be happy to hear from any they were unable to contact.

Part I

Linguistics, language, and ideology

Introduction

Language ideology: science fiction?

The American ideal, after all, is that everyone should be as much alike as possible.

James Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto" (1948)

This book is about language, but let's begin with a bit of science fiction. Imagine the following:

On January 1 of the next new year, each person residing in the United States wakes up to find themselves physically transformed: regardless of race or ethnicity, all adult males 18 and older will be exactly 6' tall and weigh 175 pounds; adult females, 5'9", at 140 pounds. All persons will show exactly the same physical measurements (length of tibia, diameter of wrist) and body fat ratios, with a differential arising from gender-specific roles in the propagation of the species. All persons newborn through age 17 will approach the adult model on a scale graduated exactly to age. Metabolism has adjusted so that the ratios of height to weight are maintained regardless of diet or development of musculature.

Let's take this strange idea a step further and imagine what this revolution would mean to us in our day-to-day lives. Some of the repercussions might be seen as positive:

- The end of the diet industry and tremendous behavior shifts in matters of mate selection and sexuality. Every woman will wear what is now a size 10, but as sizes are no longer relevant or meaningful, the social connotations of clothing sizes (*petite* or *queen*, *extra tall*, *extra long*, *extra broad*, *extra narrow*) will quickly be lost.
- Sudden resolution of health problems related to weight control. Heart disease, hypertension, anorexia – a whole range of difficult health problems greatly simplified or resolved overnight.
- Dramatic changes in the way we think about food. As metabolism is now fine-tuned to deal with excessive or insufficient calories, carbohydrate and fat intake, much of the culture and psychology about eating would evolve in new directions.

4 *Linguistics, language, and ideology*

- Revolution in the design and manufacture of easy chairs, rollerskates, toothbrushes, gloves, skis, kitchen counters, bathtubs, lawn-mower handles, car seats, bedsheets, violins, submarines, auditoriums, coffins, and everything else which now makes allowance for variation in physical size. This would mean a tremendous economic advantage for businesses which could streamline production in ways never imagined.
- Sports, professional and otherwise, would change greatly. But because muscle tone, agility, speed, and strength would remain matters of life style, nutrition, and training, sports as we know them would not disappear, but shift in focus and nature.

These are just a few areas which would be changed. The list can easily be expanded as we anticipate the major social and cultural impact on our lives.

When I discuss this fictional United States with my classes, the students are eager to list things that would be easier, cheaper, more streamlined and efficient if this physical world were suddenly to become a reality. Slowly, different considerations begin to emerge, which students are sometimes reluctant to express. They have to do with issues which are more subtle, which touch on identity and self-awareness, aesthetic and value systems. *It sounds like this would be a good thing overall, for us as a country*, says one student. *But my father and my grandfather and my great grandfather were all 6'5" or bigger.* With less of an apologetic tone, a Japanese American woman tells the class *I can't imagine being that tall.* Another student asks, *Who decided on these particular figures? Why 140 pounds for women – wouldn't 125 be more aesthetically pleasing?*

Before I let the class discuss these questions in any depth, there is one more step in the science-fiction fantasy which we must consider.

Imagine now that this unanticipated and unwilling transformation does not take place. Instead, a junior congresswoman rises before the House of Representatives and she presents a precise, well-written proposal for a law which dictates the physical world imagined above, in which a woman who is 6'2" or a man who weighs 225 pounds are either violating federal law willfully, or must be labeled handicapped.

In support of her proposal, the congresswoman outlines the many social ills which will be instantaneously fixed, and the economic advantages for the manufacturing and business communities. She provides projections which promise that billions of dollars will be saved if this law is put into effect, money which can be put into education and job training. Her presentation includes complex essays and calculations by a panel of experts who have, on the basis of considerable study, determined what ideal heights and weights must be – what makes a superior, efficient, aesthetically pleasing human being. *Let us all be one height and weight*, she says. *For we are all one nation.*

This is a funny idea; students laugh. What is wrong with it is so obvious as to be trivial, they tell me. First, we cannot all be the same height and

weight and physical type: variation and diversity are inescapable biological facts. Thus, this law would be unenforceable. Second, even if this were not an impossibility, it would be wrong – an invasion of personal liberties – to *require* people to change their physical beings to approximate some model set up by others, in the name of perceived economic or social advance, even their own. Third, and finally: the premise that we will be a better nation, a more unified nation, if we all *look* the same, is suspect.

Now what does this hypothetical world, this hypothetical congresswoman and her proposal have to do with language, and more to the point, with language and discrimination? People will immediately claim that language cannot stand in for height and weight in this story. The argument will go that language is an ethereal, mutable thing, something we learn, something within our control. Height and weight are biological facts of the physical world, determined by genetics and nutrition in the first line, and by will only secondarily. Language – which languages we speak, and how we speak them – is a matter of *choice*, people will argue, whereas height is not.

In the course of this book I will argue that language has more in common with height and weight than is readily apparent, and that the same reservations which are so self-evident when we talk about manipulation of our physical bodies can and must be applied to discourse about language, and the manipulation and evaluation of language. Language, a possession all human collectives have in common, is more than a tool for communication of facts between two or more persons. It is the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities. It may not be as tangible as height and weight, but the way we use language is more complex and meaningful than any single fact about our bodies.

The degree of control we have over language is limited. We can choose to be polite or obtuse, to use forms of address which will flatter or insult, to use gender-neutral language or language that is inflammatory; we can consciously use vocabulary which is simple, or purposefully mislead with language. But there are many dimensions of language which are not subject to conscious or direct control. Nevertheless, as speakers we are obsessed with the idea of control: we talk a great deal about language as if it were an indispensable but often wayward and unpredictable servant, in need of our constant attention and vigilance if the job is to get done.

Crucial questions have been raised here which will occupy the rest of this study:

- What is the relationship between language and social identity? How do we use language to construct “self” and “other”?
- What is or is not mutable about language, specifically about phonology (accent)?
- Do individuals have language rights which render the question of mutability irrelevant? That is, is it desirable or even possible to balance the

6 *Linguistics, language, and ideology*

individual's language rights with the needs of the community? Is this an appropriate matter for majority rule, or is it an area where the tyranny of the majority is a real threat, and individual liberties must be evoked?

- Who claims authority to make these decisions, how do they manage to do this, and why do people let them?

All of these questions are important to this study, but the last question is perhaps the most complex and difficult one. There is a common conception that there is a *good* English, and following from that, *bad* English. Further, there is a good deal of consensus on who speaks good English, and who has authority to decide what is good. While anyone would anticipate heated debate on the height/weight legislation (who has the authority to decide what an ideal person looks like, and on what aesthetic, biological, or other grounds?), it is interesting to note that there is little debate at all about who sets the standards for spoken and written language, standards which have been the focus of legislation, standards which affect our everyday lives.

Before we can set out on an exploration of these issues, however, some common ground must be identified, built of established facts about language structure and function. This will be undertaken in the first three chapters.

1 The linguistic facts of life

Language is very difficult to put into words.

Voltaire

This study is about the English language as it is spoken and written in the United States.¹ Nevertheless, the linguistic principles which provide groundwork for the discussion are not limited to English. Instead, they are generalizations about all human language, and they need to be understood before we proceed. There are some obstacles to laying out these ideas, however, and some ironies which bear consideration.

Linguists do not form a homogenous club. Like any other group of scholars divided by a common subject matter, there are great rivalries, ancient quarrels, picky arguments, and plain differences of opinion. It could hardly be otherwise in a discipline diverse enough to include topics such as neurological structures and linguistic capacity, grammaticalized strategies for encoding social information in systems of address, and creolization. Thus it should be no surprise that those who study the rules which generate the ordering of words into sentences (syntacticians and cognitive grammarians, for example) are often openly disdainful of each other's approach, on theoretical grounds, and of the study of the social life of language, more generally. Linguists concerned with the relationship between structured variation in language and social identity (sociolinguists, variationists, some anthropological linguists) chide both syntacticians and cognitive grammarians for what they see as unreasonable abstractions and lack of reproducible results; phoneticians go about their business of understanding and theorizing the way humans produce and perceive sound – the architects and engineers of linguistics – and wonder what all the noise is about; historical linguists concern themselves with the written data of lost language communities and write complex formulas for the reconstruction of sounds that might have been heard around the early Roman explorations of central Europe, or in more extreme cases, when the first people wandered from Asia to the North American land mass.