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Is Standard English a tool for Discrimination?

Holly Rae Hunt: English Department

Abstract

- This project uses research in composition studies, critical pedagogy, and archival research to address the prevalence of Standard English in course descriptions in UNC first-year composition (FYC) courses ENG 122 and 122.
- This research seeks to determine whether or not the marginalizing and systemically racist structure of Standard English derived from Harvard's English standards in the 1890's has effected UNC's curriculum from 1910-2020.
- Research from critical pedagogy shows that the foundation of Standard Academic English (SAE) in the United States has explicit ties to racist and discriminatory practices, and this research traces UNC's outward attitude toward student writing and potential areas where, throughout the past century, UNC has or still does reflect old, marginalizing notions of SAE usage in the classroom.

Goals and Objectives

- Question long-held assumptions about matters of correctness in student writing
- Investigate the history of the UNC English department, especially ways in which we can move away from potentially marginalizing practices
- Strategize ways in which we can address systemic racism in the UNC English department by reflecting on the department's past.

Methods and Materials

Primary Materials:

Primary research consists of a sampling of UNC course catalogs from 1910-2020. I analyzed and coded the FYC course descriptions for the following years:

- 1910-1911
- 1919-1920
- 1929-1930
- 1950
- 1959-1960
- 1977-1978
- 1980
- 1989-1990
- 2000
- 2010
- 2020

I coded these entries according to how much they displayed the elements of discriminatory/marginalizing pedagogical practice that my secondary research suggests has been happening in the United States during this period.

Secondary Sources:

I used secondary sources to interpret the archival documents that I recovered.

- Sharon Crowley's "The Invention of Freshman English"
 - A history of Freshman English courses which traces our current language standards to Harvard
- Laura Lisabeth's "White Fears of Possession"
 - SAE has been used as a tool of white possession and marginalization of other groups from public discourse
- Bill Reading's *University In Ruins*
 - An account for the economic and cultural shifts the American University has experienced since its foundation

Analysis

- From 1910-1929, the University of Northern Colorado, then known as the Normal School of Colorado, explicitly declared the ideology of their education and English majors to be focused on moral training and teaching students how to be "proper citizens."
 - The social Darwinism and borderline German Idealistic ideology that the Normal School explicitly states points to early English education at UNC which rests on racist and classist ideology.
- The 1950's catalogs bring an end to the explicit mention of these goals; however, the course catalog descriptions made by the English department only change significantly in 2017—over a century later.
- Keeping this ideological basis in mind, my observations of how little the course descriptions for freshman English age changed until 2017 since 1911 point to a concerning fact that while the university has re-branded itself to appear focused only on career preparation and practical knowledge, the *practices* of teaching English remain almost the same for an entire century.

Conclusions

- Composition scholars at UNC and every American school should question and be willing to actively challenge the status quo in the department and our own courses.
- The UNC English department still had work to do when it comes to making our writing standards more equitable. We need to continue to implement antiracist strategies to our FYC courses in order to mitigate the ghost of marginalization that comes with SAE.

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