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ENGH 386

28 February 2026

Losing the Mountains: An Examination of My Linguistic Identity

In fall of 2024, I took a class at George Mason University titled Continental Fiction. During this class we had weekly writing assignments in which we had to analyze the piece we read that week. On one of those assignments, the professor, an older white man, left a comment that stated that my analysis was good, but my grammar needed work, as my overuse of commas and semicolons made me write like a German. This was odd to me because I had written in this way for a long time and had never once been told my writing seemed German. This professor was not being rude, he was just pointing out what he thought were mistakes, but the use of commas and semicolons in overly long sentences is just how I write. I wrote that way to emulate the writers I thought were great thinkers, it was a result of me wanting to sound smarter than the region of my origins, Appalachia. In my speaking and writing I had grown up to forget the mountains my family had called home for generations because of the standards pushed onto me, and those same standards were rearing their head again. The way I write, despite not being the apparent standard was a result of Standardized American English being pushed onto me. Standardized American English is a white supremacist language system that creates and upholds classism through the encouragement of conformity to a “standard” American identity.

In the story above my professor pointing out that I write like a German. is an attempt to conform me to Standardized English by labeling my writing as non-standard, or non-American. Claiming my writing as German, even if indirectly, is a habit of white language, or a HOWL,

which is defined by Asao Inoue as “the language habits usually assumed or promoted as universally appropriate, correct, or best in writing and speaking by those with the power to do so. Historically, these habits of language have come out of White racial groups...” (Inoue 22). When dealing with a user of the standardized form of a language, they will treat that form of language as the only correct form and all others as wrong. While HOWL stands for habits of white language, it was being used against another white language. That is because English with Germanic sentence structures is still not “standard,” so it does not fit within the mainstream American identity. However, it was trying to fit in with that mainstream identity that led me to write the way I did in that class and do now.

In the summer of 2009, when I moved from Augustus, a small town in West Virginia, to Winchester, Virginia, I was pressured to abandon the English I had been speaking with all my childhood, to conform to the standardized form. I was raised by parents who both come from families with deep Appalachian roots. My mother and her family hail from the tristate area of West-Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, while my father hails from the DC area, specifically Herndon, and his family hails from Tennessee and parts of Pennsylvania. Growing up, my mother spoke in heavy West-Virginian Appalachian accent and spoke using those grammar structures and words. My father would often use Appalachian words, but he spoke with the grammar structures more common in NOVA. As a young boy my grammar structures and vocabulary more closely resembled my fathers, but the Appalachian influences were more notable. Where my mother would say “y’all ain’t” right, my father would say “you all ain’t right,” and I would switch back and forth. The way I spoke was fine in Augustus, it actually sounded “urban” or “smart” there, like my family was doing well for themselves. That changed when moving to Winchester, when suddenly my English was too “hillbilly.”

After moving to Winchester, Virginia, from Augustus, school taught me that my family and I's unique Appalachian identity was not "correct," and that I needed to conform to a "standard" American identity by conforming my language to Standardized American English. One of the first ways this was done was through social ostracization. Winchester sits on the outskirts of the Appalachian region, and the culture there, while influenced by Appalachian culture, was inclined to be assimilated into the NOVA and DC area culture. As a result of this, Standardized American English, was heavily pushed in the town. This heavy push of a certain language was actually a push for a certain identity because as rhetorical theory shows language is both influenced by identity and creates it. The grammar structures and vocabularies we speak and write with inform others of our cultural identities and standing, but our cultural identities and standing also create and inform the language we use (Scott 48-49). Since the culture of Winchester wanted to push a more mainstream identity onto its civilians, Englishes like Appalachian English, and AAVE were discouraged. Much of this discouragement was done through peer pressure. When I started first grade, I did not have a thick Appalachian accent, but I pronounced "crayon" as "crown" (with emphasis on the "o"), and I used words like ain't and y'all. My peers made fun of me for this small use of Appalachian English, and my teacher often got on me for using "ain't" and "y'all" in sentences, both written and spoken. I was once even told by both peers and teachers "we ain't hicks here," which was said with a mocking accent that I did not even have. This push away from Appalachian English and the relentless singling out of speakers of it, was a form of classism.

The erasure of Appalachian Englishes and identities stems from a form linguistic classism based in the same white supremacy used to linguistically other people of color. Historically the Appalachian region is the poorest area in the United States. Looking at the statistics, the poverty

rate in Appalachia is 14.3%, with a median household income of \$64,588, which is a whole \$13,950 less than the median household income of the broader United States. This region has been historically kept poor because it is where many Irish and German immigrants, former slaves, and indigenous people, have migrated too to pursue better lives and safety. As Inoue states in his linguistic memoir, the communities and areas in which Ethnic minorities live are kept poor as a form of racial oppression (Inoue 66-67). Due to the link between economic class and race, white people that happen to be poor are almost racialized, allowing terms like “hillbilly” to carry many of the mainstream identities about Appalachian culture in it. We see words and structures being used and created to create an identity that is pushed onto Appalachians, and identity that was pushed onto a 6 year old me. While I am white, due to the area and economic class linked to the way I spoke as a young child, I have been harmed by white supremacy. It is also because of these white supremacist class standards that Appalachians, and poor Americans in general, are associated with moral failings and a lack of intelligence.

In first grade, while I was white and middle class, I was on the lower end of middle class, but no one in my school knew that. However, many of my peers assumed I was poor enough to be on welfare because of the way my mom spoke, and the words I would sometimes speak and write with. I would have other kids of other ethnicities be wary of me when I let an ain’t or y’all slip out because of a widely believed idea that Appalachians are inherently racist. Racism, in the contemporary world, has been supposedly made into a moral failing so white middle class Americans can have something they are not, and a group of white Americans they can be better than. On top of this, my teachers in grade school would tell me that I showed signs of being very smart, I just had to start writing and speaking like it. With all this piled onto a six year old, mixed with my own issues that I had begun to develop with my family and Appalachian culture, I began

to hate being associated with Appalachian culture and feared being labeled a hick. In the distant was this form of English that promised to make me sound smart, that promised to shape my identity into the same one all my peers had, American Standardized English. I adopted it and adapted to it, and conformed, and as life went on, I lost the Appalachian part of my identity.

Going through grade school, I was taught that run on sentences were bad, and that fragments were also bad. It was unclearly explained to me how to use commas and semi colons, and that a proper sentence was more than three words long. When I got to college, I was taught it wasn't about length, it was structure that made the sentence. That idea, coupled with my love of writers like Kafka, Nietzsche, and Fitzgerald, who all wrote in these long complicated sentences with big words, I began to develop my writing and editing style into one that focused on making me sound Academic. I had conformed to white middle class language and developed my own HOWLs, as I used to point out grammar "mistakes" that did not affect a piece in peer reviews. This brings me back to my junior year and that comment. That professor pointing out that I was still not writing in the standardized English made me realize what I had done to myself over my life, and a class in post-colonial theory taught me that grammar structures are arbitrary. I had formed a writing and editing style that was focused on purging all elements of my Appalachian identity, and I am not sure I can recover from it, but I am trying to.

Standardized American English pushes a form of classism based in white supremacy that encourages the abandoning of unique identities for a conformed mass one. While my writing and editing journey still led me to a "non-standard" form of English, it was still a form that HOWLed loudly. However, I am currently trying to quiet my HOWLing, and that begins with a reexamination of Appalachian culture and my issues with it, which begins with a reevaluation of

the language and the fact that I am embarrassed by it. I am only one person that conformed to an identity at the cost of their own, but I believe we can all do the work to destandarized ourselves.

Works Cited

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