

LET THE COPULA BE

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My fervor for language began when I was in the second grade. I believed there was only one way to speak correctly, and I was going to do that while making sure everyone else did also. I corrected people's language, particularly my family's, at every opportunity. I was the militant language midget. Once, when I was a teenager attending a family function, I remember asking my relatives, "Why do Black people use *be* so much?" Not surprisingly, no one gave a satisfactory answer.

I was a zealous crusader for "good" language. When I went to the University of Texas (UT), I decided I would become a speech pathologist so I could teach people to speak "right." Family conversations about the language of a well-known former UT football player who had finished his NFL career and was now working at UT fueled my pursuit of this goal. This football icon had been notorious in my family for talking "bad." My family's surprise at the improvement in his language after he had completed his speech degree and become a spokesperson for UT was the final sign I needed to know that speech pathology was the way I should go. If speech pathologists could help this football icon speak "good" English, then I knew I could teach anyone to speak "good" English.

I jumped into my major eager to begin my life of public service for all those "bad" English users. However, when I took a couple of classes in English language—"History of the English Language" and "American English"—my life was forever changed. I realized then that language variation was not "bad"; it was not a pathology to be cured but a difference to be celebrated. I learned that language variation represented a history, a culture, an identity that should not and could not be eradicated. I also realized I'd spent most of my life believing everything that school and society told me: smart, successful, intelligent people speak "good" English; limited, derelict, unintelligent people speak "bad" English. As a speaker of African American English, I heard that often and with conviction. Black people used *be* in the wrong place and said *ain't*—something everyone knew wasn't in the dictionary and, therefore, couldn't possibly be a word.

Several years later, I came across a passage in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982, 183) that exemplified my early prescriptive fervor:

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. She say us not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say us where most folks say we, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse. What I care? I ast. I'm

happy. But she say I feel more happier talking like she talk. . . . Every time I say something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. . . . Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind.

I realized I had chosen something peculiar to my mind. I had chosen to believe the language of my family, my community, was bad and inferior—meaning my family and my community were inferior. The language is the people—“the language, only the language” (LeClair 1981, 29), because “language is the only homeland” (Marshall 1983, 7). I embarked on a new journey to find and reclaim my homeland. I have gone from one end of the continuum to the other, and I know it has been a change for the better. My family still expects me to correct them. I struggle with that because they believe in me more than themselves.

My mom tells me it's easy for me to say there's no “good” or “bad” English because I know and use “good” English. She believes I don't know what it's like to use only “bad” English in a society that demands that everyone use “good” English or else. It's like when rich people tell you money doesn't bring happiness. They can say that because they're rich and know it from experience. I think my mom and I are both right. Because I know a language of wider communication but also understand that all languages are systematic and rule-governed, I can say it doesn't matter if you say *It bes that way sometime* or *That's just the way it is*. My mom and others in my family don't have the luxury of knowing either.

Since I now research language use in the African American community, because I am on a lifelong journey of reclamation, affirmation, and celebration of the language of my family and community, I don't ask why black people use *be* so much (or why they delete it); I just think, “It bes that way sometime.”

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