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# Tuning Learners to Linguistic Diversity Using the “Your Words” Activity

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The “Your Words” activity invites students to explore how they vary the ways that they communicate in their various speech communities (Morgan, 2014; Rampton, 2020). Students may consider their speech communities in only general terms, such as “I am a speaker of English and Cantonese because I am a resident of Hong Kong.” Or “I am from Miami, so I speak English and Spanish at home. Or “I like to skateboard, and I share some jargon with my skate mates that I don’t use in other situations.” To help them reflect more deeply on communities for which they may not have names, the “Your Words” activity invites them to reflect on and share a word or phrase that they only use in specific social groups that form part of their lives. The discussion that follows encourages students to consider how they modify the way they communicate as they move through the different speech communities that are part of their daily lives. The activity is useful for raising awareness of speech communities before introducing discussions about language attitudes and beliefs that can help prepare pre-service teachers for working with students whose linguistic and cultural diversity is unfamiliar to them.

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## INTRODUCTION

As schools in the United States become more diverse, teachers often find themselves working with students they feel underprepared to serve. They may hold positive attitudes towards immigrant and refugee English Language Learners (Karabenick & Noda, 2004; Khong & Saito, 2014), or speakers of Black Language (Baker-Bell, 2020), but they may still not recognize how their beliefs about the languages their students use may be harmful to those students (Pettit, 2011). Even though they may have taken required classes in multiculturalism and multicultural education, teachers do not often learn about linguistic diversity issues in any depth. For instance, they may believe that ‘non-standard’ versions of English are just flawed versions of the ‘standard’ version, or they may fail to understand how academic literacy takes several years to develop fully (Kim, 2021).

### Background

In 2011, I designed a course to introduce pre-service teachers to ways that English learners and learners of academic English experience the process of language learning as whole persons. In my class, they read texts such as April Baker-Bell’s *Linguistic Justice* to consider how linguisticism, racism, critical aspects of language structure and pragmatics, and language attitudes and beliefs may play a role in their teaching. They read memoirs by immigrants and language learners such as Gerardo Gonzalez (2018) and Eva Hoffman (1989). When they investigated key structural aspects of language, we focused on features that have clear connections to social behavior, such as formality, grammatical and social gender, hedging, negation, and verb forms. These features also frequently vary between languages, and form the basis for some comparative work looking at languages that are commonly spoken by new immigrants to the United States (e.g., Chinese,

Russian, Hmong, Spanish) (Shatz & Williamson, 2013). After this preparation, they interviewed adults who have come to the USA to study or work, asking them about their reasons for moving, their experiences as immigrants or migrants, and their specific struggles with learning English. Students completed a portfolio at the end of the semester that included work samples highlighting how they met the course's objectives.

## Rationale

Early in the semester—while establishing some key concepts of language, such as language variation, academic discourse—this activity prompts the students to reflect deeply on how they vary their language according to their interactions with different people in their daily lives. A “speech community” is a concept from sociolinguistics that is essential for understanding language and linguistic diversity (Morgan, 2014). Speech communities are “groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties and practices” (Morgan, 2014, p. 1). They are critical for identity formation and belonging because they share values and perspectives that develop over time through interaction among group members. I used to give students simple examples ways that they might share language practices with groups in their lives, such as adapting the tone of a text message to the recipient, or varying their speech when talking to a friend in comparison to talking to a parent or other older adult. Or how they might lapse back into a dialect while visiting home during spring break. However, such examples were too generic. Students could understand the idea of a speech community in general terms, but I wanted them to be able to understand it on a deeper level. The “Your Words” activity was the result of this pedagogical dilemma.

In “Your Words,” as students are invited to think of their own examples, they are prepared to more deeply analyze samples of language that are meaningful to them. In discussions following the initial sharing of their examples, we look at aspects of speech events as described by Dell Hymes (1974), such as setting, participants, purposes, act sequences, tone, register, and social norms to familiar students with ways that ‘their words’ can be described and compared.

## Implementation

### *Sample “Your Words” Activity*

What follows is an example of the “Your Words” activity, designed for implementation in an asynchronous, online learning environment:

Introduction to the Activity: Each of us belongs to different speech communities and when we move from one to another, we often shift vocabulary, grammar, accent, and even attitude, without giving the shift much thought. The “Your Words” activity invites you to slow down and explore some of your speech communities.

Think about a word or phrase, in any language, that you use frequently, but which you would need to explain to many of us in this class. Your words can come from a regional or social variation that you use, any language, or specific words or phrases you use at your job or with

your family. For instance, you might think of a word or phrase that you share with your family members, your partner, or your colleagues. You may only use this word or phrase in one place or space. Your words may not translate easily into 'standard' English. They might even be words that you and your group made up together, such as a secret catchphrase or expression. The key factor for selecting the words is having to explain them to people who do not belong to the same group that shares the words with you.

**Directions:**

1. Create a visually appealing 8.5x11" poster in which you provide the words and a brief definition. In a short video (30 seconds to 1 minute), share your poster and explain how you use your words, and post the video to the discussion. When do you use it? Who are the people who share these words with you? How does using these words make you feel? Have you ever used these words out of context? Have you ever been ridiculed or shamed by others for using the words you have described?

2. Review several of your colleagues' posts. Ask thoughtful questions for clarification.

3. Create a second post discussing your observations. Answer the following questions:

-What kinds of social groups do you and your colleagues describe? List a few of them.

-Look at the list you have created. How do these speech communities vary according to features such as age, gender, ethnicity, social background, educational experiences, place, status, racialization<sup>1</sup>, or economic situation?

-For deeper analysis, discuss the follow questions (derived from Hymes, 1974):

-What is the setting [time, place] and the scene [cultural definition]?

-Who are the participants in this literacy event?

-What are the purposes, goals, and outcomes of the event?

-What is the act sequence [what is the order of actions; beginning, middle, and end]?

-What is the tone or spirit of the event [e.g., playful, serious, sincere]?

-Is the register casual or formal?

-What kinds of social norms or rules govern this event?

-What is the genre [e.g. a verbal command? a joke?, profanity?]?

<sup>1</sup> Instead of relying on 'race' as a defining category for understanding identity, we use the terms 'hyporaced' (Whiteness) and 'hyperraced' (nonWhiteness, Blackness, BIPOCness, indigenouness, or people of colorness) to discuss the ways that race is practiced in a Post-White orientation (Croom, 2021).

### ***Variations on the Activity***

In a face-to-face classroom setting, I ask the students to quickly create the poster in class, using colorful paper and markers that I provide. Then I may ask them to get into small groups and share their posters with each other, then write a mini blog about their observations. Or I may ask students to present their posters to the class one by one. Sometimes I collect the posters and take pictures of them to post in a learning management system; sometimes we put them on the wall in the classroom and leave them up for everyone to see. Students may follow up on their words presentation by doing some research on the origins of the words (if they are not

known) and explore language surveys and dictionaries as applicable. If they offer a word from a language other than English, they need to specify which groups use the word frequently in that language. The deeper analysis section can be used for a follow-up writing assignment or blog post in which students provide a more academic description of their original words presentations using Hymes's sociolinguistic framework (1974).

### ***My Introduction to the "Your Words" Activity***

When I introduce this activity, I give the students plenty of time to think about their words and provide some examples to get them thinking. It's important to give them unusual examples that allow them to move beyond the academic setting and probe their daily lives for the ways that they vary their language. I will also provide some examples from my own store of speech practices. Here are three examples that I have used: "schnipples," "mpamba," and "hugger-mugger."

**Schnipples.** When introducing this activity, I often share how when I was a child, my mother would use "schnipple" to refer to the small bits of cloth and thread that I would leave lying around after doing sewing projects. "Pick up those schnipples," she would demand. Or "vacuum up all those schnipples on the couch cushions." I never heard "schnipples" outside of my family and didn't really consider that it might be a word derived from German immigrants until I was well into my 20s. I found it in *The Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)* when I was preparing the "Your Words" activity for the first time. The definition there fits with my memories:

Also *schnipfel*, *s(ch)nipple*, *schnivle*, *schnuffel*, *s(c)hnibbel*, *snibble*, *snibblin*, *snipsle* [Ger *Schnippel* a scrap] chiefly German settlement areas (Cassidy and Hall).

I explain that other people who come from Wisconsin might not recognize the word "schnipple," because the word is connected to a social group, immigrants from Germany who settled in the area. So, the word has a regional locus, but more specifically a social locus, and may follow people who move to other parts of the United States.

**Mpamba.** Another example comes from my family's lengthy sojourn in central Africa in the 1980s, in the northwestern area of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) where Lingala is spoken as a lingua franca. I was in my teens then and worked explicitly on learning Lingala outside of school. My family will still code-switch using it when we are in the company of others who know the language. Usually this is just with family members, but when we occasionally meet with others who also know Lingala, we will start to use words such as "mpamba."

That oven is just *mpamba*. It won't keep a steady temperature anymore. [*mpamba* means 'useless']

White people's hair is so *mpamba*. It's so hard to fix up, and the style only lasts for a day.

I share that I never use Lingala code-switching when I am with people who don't know the language. Doing so might be seen as showing off, but I have also been ridiculed for being part

of a missionary family, even though as a child I had no choice about the ways that my parents decided to live or practice their religious faith. I explain that we often make these decisions about how to speak instantaneously, but they may be based on experiences that have made deep impressions on us.

**Hugger-mugger.** This means a big hug, and I only use it when sharing a hug with my daughter. It evokes for me the intensity of a “mugger” or marsh crocodile, found in India and neighboring countries. My daughter rarely uses the word and I never use it with members of my extended family, so it is effectively a one-person expression.

This activity allows us to enter earthier, material aspects of daily life: sewing dresses, fixing hair, baking bread in an old oven, or sharing a big hug. Students will want to talk about jokes they share among friends or families. Or they will share expressions that derived from shared experiences with close friends. Together we have learned ways to express concern for others in Indonesian and Shanghainese, or how to express impatience in North Korean. We have had countless examples of Spanglish, as well as glimpses of ways to show respect to elders in Burmese and Kinyarwanda—both linguistic groups that have settled in the Midwest. Some expressions are explicitly translingual, showing code-mixing between languages in family settings or in language classroom. Some are silly nicknames that are used only in family settings, veiled insults or teasing expressions used with dorm or apartment mates. Some students share that they don’t use punctuation in text messages; a comma or a period sounds angry or distant. Some share greetings such as ‘dude’ or ‘fam’ and explain that they greet close friends this way. Other common phrases often address eating food, sharing concern for each other, teasing close friends, making jokes, sharing secrets, or expressing emotions such as anger, confusion, or frustration. Many of these topics rarely come up in academic discussions but connect us to our lived experiences in the world. Regardless of who we are or where we come from, we all are members of different speech communities that may overlap with each other or be in tension with each other. These speech communities represent many types of diversity. Everyone notices how they represent various kinds of diversity in the ways they use language.

To conclude the activity, we discuss how everyday language that all of us use may not fit with received notions about what is correct language and that it can be easy to make quick judgements about how other people might be using language. We discuss how the language examples shared might vary according to the speakers’ age, gender, ethnicity, social background, educational experiences, place, status, racialization, or economic situation. I give students some time to write a short summary of their observations about the different ways that they use language. Depending on the context, they may share these thoughts as online micro-blogs, as gallery walks, or as exit cards that I then type up and distribute in class the next day.

These observations help students make connections to the theoretical notions of speech community that we discuss throughout the semester. Understanding the variety and complexity of speech communities helps students grasp concepts that are important for pre-service teachers who will work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. Understanding how to recognize deficit beliefs about English Language Learners and linguistic-minority students, understanding how languages vary regionally and socially, recognizing linguistic discrimination, understanding differences between describing descriptivism and prescriptivism, and understanding how judgments about language purity can be injurious to learners who are

developing their language skills—all of these dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs are critical for creating a welcoming learning environment for language-diverse students.

Near the end of the semester, we discuss Baker-Bell's framing ideas for an antiracist language and literacy pedagogy, and the “Your Words” activity and intervening discussions provide a platform for making connections to linguistic communities that are as old or older than the United States. Baker-Bell advocates for a Black language pedagogy that “intentionally and unapologetically places the linguistic, cultural, racial, intellectual, and self-confidence needs of Black students at the center of their language education” (2020, p. 9). For Baker-Bell, the discourse about the needs of Black students transfers without friction to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students such immigrant and refugee English Language Learners. Building a classroom where everyone's experiences of language are respected and treated as valuable helps to build up to this realization for pre-service teachers.

### **Special Considerations for Implementation**

- When students present their work, refrain from making comments and simply ask clarifying questions if their explanation of their word isn't clear enough. It is important to avoid expressing judgement because students should explore their speech communities without feeling that they are opening themselves up to ridicule by sharing something that they normally would not say in the classroom.
- Create your own examples to help get the activity going for your students. Personal examples that are connected to deeply formative and individual experiences help learners to think about their own speech communities. They need to think outside of the limitations that they naturally put on their speech when they come to class and enter a domain where the academic discourses that they may use don't include their private, family and friend speech communities. They are not accustomed to using these words in a classroom setting. Modeling can help them to bridge the gap between what they usually consider to be acceptable language for the classroom and what they might say or write freely in other contexts outside of the constraints of formal education.
- Decide how to address profanity or vulgarity. I have seen students use profane or vulgar expressions in their responses to the activity. When this happens, I respond to their presentations as with all the other students' presentations: without judgement or commentary.
- Refrain from praising, and allow each presenter roughly the same amount of time to talk. Respond similarly to each student, regardless of how you might feel about their example. Model an attitude that is not judgmental about students' linguistic capital, because this is the attitude that you want them to model for their own students someday.

## CONCLUSION

This discussion reviews how a single activity helps prepare the class for discussions about speech communities, linguistic discrimination, linguistic rights, and more. Understanding that they are members of multiple speech communities and that their students also belong to multiple communities helps introduce discussions about linguistic and cultural diversity less familiar to them. This understanding provides a foundation for talking about beliefs and ideologies about language that are often omitted from teacher education.

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