DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

THESIS

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by

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DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

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DEDICATION

~ to the love of my life ~

♥ Dorothy ♥

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

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After we moved to San Marcos so I could attend graduate school, my wife and I visited several local churches with hopes of finding a church home. On one of these visits at a local church, we were browsing in the foyer before the meeting started, and I found a pamphlet about the church. When I read it, I was shocked by what I found. This professionally printed pamphlet, which was carefully placed in a position where it was virtually the first thing visitors would see after walking through the front door, was written very poorly. Every third or fourth word was misspelled or the wrong word, and there were obvious subject-verb agreement errors, punctuation and capitalization errors, and other errors. This pamphlet was apparently intended to introduce the church to visitors, and, as such, represented the church to the outside world. I found myself questioning how much the members of this church really cared about the image they projected to the world when they apparently did not care enough to have a simple

pamphlet professionally proofread before sending it to the printer. In fairness, I must ask myself: "Am I overly sensitive to imperfections in written English because of my English language education? Am I being too picky? Does it really matter?"

One of the requirements of one of my graduate-level rhetoric and composition seminar classes was to write "reading responses" to assigned readings, and to post them on TRACS, an interactive Internet website so the entire class would be able to read them. Upon reading the responses written by some of my classmates, all of whom were graduate students in the English department, I was appalled by what I read. Some of the responses contained errors such as misspelled words, wrong words, comma splices, sentence fragments, end-of-sentence prepositions, and capitalization and punctuation errors. Does it really matter? Does using Standard English, which includes correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage really matter, or are these concepts irrelevant in the twenty-first century because the English language has evolved into an informal language in which these conventions, which are now regarded seriously only by white people in academia, are archaic and no longer necessary? I hope to address these and other questions in this treatise: my Master's thesis.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ethnologue, an online reference that catalogs all the known living languages on the planet Earth, lists 6,909 languages that are spoken today. The English language is only one of many, yet it is very significant in the world theater. Since the fifth century, the English language has been native to England and eventually spread to Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Due to England's post-Colombian colonization all over the world, English is now the dominant language in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States of America.

The history of the English language begins in the year 449 when the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes sailed across the North Sea from Denmark and coastal Germany and invaded the British Isles, bringing with them their Germanic language, which is historically known as *Anglo-Saxon* or *Old English*. The language of these invaders virtually supplanted the Celtic languages spoken by the native Britons, leaving only about a dozen Celtic words that found their way into Old English (McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil 60). Despite the many influences to which English has been exposed, which eventually resulted in its evolution into twenty-first century English, the original Anglo-Saxon language remains the "backbone" of the English language. Computer analysis of Modern English indicates that the one hundred most common words are all of Anglo-Saxon origin (60). Anyone who speaks or writes English in modern times uses accents,

words, and grammar which go all the way back to the Old English of the Anglo-Saxons (61).

In the sixth and seventh centuries, the introduction of Roman Christianity to the British Isles resulted in an infusion of Latin into the English language (McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil 64-65). The introduction of the *Holy Bible* also brought with it new words of Hebrew and Greek origin (67). Initially, these Hebrew and Greek words that found their way into English passed through Latin, since Latin was the only language in which the Bible was available in England for at least 700 years. John Wycliffe and his associates produced the first English translation of the Bible in the fourteenth century (Cairns 246), but it was translated from Latin, not from the original Hebrew and Greek (Baugh and Cable 184). In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale translated the New Testament from the original Greek, but it had very limited circulation (Cairnes 321). A serious attempt was not made to translate the entire Bible into English, directly from the original Hebrew and Greek, until the early seventeenth century's *Authorised Version*, which is known today as the *King James Version* (McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil 110-13).

Beginning in the eighth century, invasions into what is now England by the Vikings from Scandinavia introduced words from the Old Norse language, which had the same Germanic roots, into the English language (McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil 68-70). Arguably the most significant historical event in the evolution of the English language was the Norman invasion of 1066, led by William the Conqueror, which brought the French language, by force, to England (Baugh and Cable 108). Even then, many of these "new" French words originally had Latin origins (184-85). McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil state that "the overwhelming majority of English people experienced the humiliations of

a linguistic apartheid" (73). English remained the vernacular spoken by the "common"

people, but French was now the language of the royalty, aristocracy, and the church for

the next 300 years. English, however, survived—but was profoundly transformed by the

infusion of Norman French (73-76). The two languages and cultures merged relatively

quickly—facilitated by intermarriage. In 1177, an English jurist wrote the following:

"Now that the English and Normans have been dwelling together, marrying and giving in

marriage, the two nations have become so mixed that it is scarcely possible today […] to

tell who is English, and who is of Norman race" (Baugh and Cable 120).

Have the many changes in English resulted in the enrichment of the language—or

the degradation of it? It is a philosophical distinction that depends upon the perspective of

the individual. One possible position is that English is in a constant state of flux—that the

changes the language has experienced for more than 1500 years represent a natural

process of change that will continue, and should continue, into the future, and any

changes—no matter how profound—should be accepted without resistance. Another

viewpoint is that the English language is a thing of beauty and great value, which should

be defended against aggressive influences that seek to corrupt it. I believe that the

historical changes which resulted in the end product of Modern English could be

considered *enrichment*, but that at some point, a line must be drawn in the sand, and

radical change, including that which is initiated by "pop culture," should be recognized as

a *degradation* of the language—and should therefore be resisted. I also believe that the

acceptance of regional and ethnic dialects of English as viable alternatives to Standard

English, which is inappropriately presumed to be "white" English, divides people into

groups and is antithetical to the unity of native speakers in the United States, England, and elsewhere.

In past generations, English language scholars perceived an imminent threat to the integrity of the English language of their day. In 1561, for instance, Sir John Checke wrote the following statement of his opposition to words from other languages being assimilated into English:

> I am of this opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borowing of other tunges, wherin if we take not heed by tijm, ever borowing and never payeng, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt. For then doth our tung naturallie and praisablie utter her meaning, when she bouroweth no counterfeitness of other tunges to attire her self withall, but useth plainlie her own, with such shift, as nature, craft, experiens and folowing of other excellent doth lead her unto, and if she want at ani tijm (as being unperfight she must) yet let her borow with suche bashfulnes, that it mai appeer, that if either the mould of our own tung could serve us to fascion a woord of our own, or if the old denisoned wordes could content and ease this neede, we wold not boldly venture of unknowen wordes. (qtd. in Baugh and Cable 217-18, sic)

In his essay "The Formation of College English," Thomas P. Miller states the following regarding James Beattie who taught at Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland, in the late eighteenth century:

> Rather than teaching rhetoric as a political art, Beattie concentrated on polite taste and usage. He advised students to avoid the idioms of their

own nation [Scotland] because such "barbarous language debases the taste" and "taints the mind." If Scottish words are allowed into English, "our speech must in a few years be barbarous. But this, every person of taste, who loves his country, understands its language, and wishes well to its literature, will do everything in his power to counteract." (63)

Miller further comments that "the Scots who taught the language and literature of England were intensely aware that [the English language] they studied was not a part of their heritage by birth but had to be consciously acquired by mastering the conventions of the dominant culture" (67).

Even at universities in England of that time, scholars were concerned about the contaminating effect of nonstandard dialects on "proper" English. In his essay, "Rhetoric for the Meritocracy," Wallace Douglas states that John Ward, who lectured at Gresham College in London between 1720 and 1758, was aware that the English language was evolving and that the vocabulary was growing (77). Ward acknowledges that, to the grammarians, "all words are esteemed pure, which are once adopted into a language and authorised by use" (qtd. in Douglas 80-81). Although Ward conceded that all words are valid if used consistently, that does not mean that these words are appropriate for the use of those "who speak or write with accuracy and politeness" (81). Ward considered "accuracy and politeness" to entail more than just the avoidance of vulgar colloquial language; apparently, he also considered it impolite to use words that only the most educated individuals would know, in order to exclude or demean others. Ward stated that "we should speak agreeably to the common usage of the tongue, that everyone may understand us" (81). He moreover states the following:

[P]olite and elegant speakers distinguish themselves by their discourse, as persons of figure do by their garb; one being the dress of the mind, as the other is of the body. [. . .] Both have their different fashions [. . .]. [In addition to] sordid words and expressions, which are rendered so by the use of the vulgar, there is another sort first introduced by [polite and elegant speakers], which is carefully to be avoided by all those, who are desirous to speak well. (81)

Ward apparently believed that both proper English and nonstandard dialects have their place within their own contexts, stating that "the vulgar have their peculiar words and phrases, suited to their circumstances, and taken from such things, as usually occur in their way of life" (81). However, such "peculiar words and phrases" are not necessarily appropriate outside of their context. Those who speak English with "accuracy and politeness" should not only avoid the use of "vulgar" colloquial words and phrases, but should also avoid difficult or complex language that is not universally understood. "Polite and elegant speakers" are those who show respect for the language and those with whom they are speaking.

As the English language migrated to the United States, so did attitudes concerning the preservation of the purity of the language. In 1892, for instance, A. R. Spofford encouraged the Modern Language Association to create "a barrier against the tide of vulgar slang, which is coming in like a flood, and threatens to submerge our noble English tongue" (qtd. in Stewart 130). In 1946, in "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell first states the general assumption that the degradation of English is inevitable and impossible to counteract; Orwell then refutes this assumption:

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to airplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes. […]

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which *can be avoided* if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that *the fight against bad English is not frivolous* and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. (872, emphasis added)

Is the integrity of a language worth defending? Perhaps the earliest example in recorded history of a concerted attempt to preserve the purity of a language comes from the first century BC. Dionysius Thrax, a Greek grammarian, wrote *The Art of Grammar* "to aid in the study of literature and to preserve the purity of the [Greek] language" using the works of Homer as his standards (Rodby and Winterowd 2). More recently, the French government established the *Académie française*, created by Cardinal Richelieu under Louis XIII in 1635, as a government agency that moderates the *French* language by determining standards of acceptable grammar and vocabulary, as well as adapting to

linguistic change by adding new words and updating the meanings of existing ones (Lawless). The principal goal of the *Académie française* is the "enhancement and stabilization of the French language, which must be given rules to make it pure and eloquent" (Van Male 1). Ironically, the *Académie française* today feels compelled to protect the French language from the "corrupting" influence of *English*. Because of the status of English in the world, the *Académie's* task tends to be focused on lessening the influx of English terms into French by choosing or inventing French equivalents. For example, a recent decision of the *Académie* was to declare the appropriate French word for *email* as *courriel* (Lawless).

Spain has a similar language-protecting organization, *Real Academia Española*, the official royal institution responsible for regulating the *Spanish* language. Although based in Madrid, it is affiliated with national language academies in twenty-one Spanish-speaking nations through the *Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española* ("Real"; "Asociación"). The official website of *Real Academia Española* cites the following as its mission statement:

> La misión principal de la Real Academia Española, según los Estatutos que regulan su funcionamiento, es evitar que los cambios que experimente la lengua española en su constante adaptación a las necesidades de sus hablantes quiebren la unidad que mantiene en todo el ámbito hispánico. A tal fin, la Academia debe establecer los criterios de propiedad y corrección de la lengua, así como contribuir a su esplendor. En cumplimiento de este mandato se desarrollan los proyectos académicos.[1] ("Obras")

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[1] The principal mission of the Royal Academy of Spain, according to the statutes which regulate its functions, is to avoid those changes which the Spanish language experiments with in its constant adaptation

Moreover, the following excerpt from a United Nations treaty made between the governments of Spain and Honduras states, "Las Altas Partes contratantes propenderán a la salvaguardia de la pureza e integridad de la lengua española. A este efecto, dispensarán su apoyo a las instituciones culturales dedicadas a ese fin y especialmente a las respectivas Academias de la Lengua"[2] ("Disposiciones").

Other countries also consider English a corrupting influence on their respective languages. For example, according to an online article from *BBC News*, the Italian parliament has concerns about the growing number of English words infiltrating the *Italian* language ("Italians"). Even in The People's Republic of China, where natives speak the Mandarin dialect of Chinese, there is concern about corruption of *their* language by English:

> Chinese newspapers, books and websites will no longer be allowed to use English words and phrases, the country's publishing body has announced, saying the "purity" of the Chinese language is in peril. *The General Administration of Press and Publication* [. . .] said the increasing use of English words and abbreviations in Chinese texts had caused confusion and was a means of "abusing the language." Such practices "severely damaged the standard and purity of the Chinese language and disrupted the harmonious and healthy language and cultural environment, causing negative social impacts [. . .]." (Breitbart)

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to the necessities of its speakers and which might break the unity which Spanish maintains in all of its Hispanic sphere. To this end, the Academy ought to establish the criteria for the propriety and correctness of the language, as well as contributing to its splendor. To fulfill this mandate, academic projects will be developed (trans. Jaime A. Mejía).

[2] The highest contracting parties will intend to safeguard the purity and integrity of the Spanish language. To this end, these parties will provide their support to those cultural institutions dedicated to this end and especially to the respective Academies of the Language (trans. Jaime A. Mejía).

John M. Lipski, Professor of Linguistics at Pennsylvania State University, comments on the degradation of languages spoken in the United States by immigrants:

> "Pennsylvania Dutch" and Amish German are regarded as quaint and endearing, despite the objective fact that the dialects in question are regarded as highly non-standard within German-speaking countries. The same is substantially true of Cajun French, which has become a symbol of pride for Louisiana, despite stemming from a non-canonical provincial dialect and bearing the clear imprint of contact with English. [. . .] Languages such as Portuguese, Czech, Swedish, Polish, and Greek, all arriving in the United States in the form of a pastiche of vernacular and usually rural dialects, pass under the radar of metalinguistic commentary [. . .]. (2)

Lipski further states the following regarding the effect of English on Spanish:

> Outside of the United States, the situation of the Spanish language in the U.S. is often entangled with anti-imperialistic political postures that assume as axiomatic that any language and culture arriving in the United States will be overwhelmed by Anglo-American values, and will be denatured, weakened, contaminated, and ultimately assimilated by the mainstream juggernaut. (19)

English is perceived as such a threat to the integrity of other languages with which it interacts that governments of nations feels compelled to defend their languages from corruption—so does English suffer similar corruption from contact with other languages? Lipski states that the interaction of English and Spanish in the United States has

"generally been viewed as detrimental to both Spanish and English" (1). That *may* be true, but since the alleged contamination of other languages by English is a direct result of the domination of English in the world, I do not think that the process is always reciprocal.

The biggest threat to English, however, comes not from other languages but from its own native speakers. There is no organization such as the *Académie française* or the *Real Academia Española* to protect *English* from corruption and to make decisions regarding the adaptation of the language to fit the needs of the modern world. If such a group existed, it could, for example, create new gender-neutral pronouns that would satisfy feminist concerns about the supposed masculinist domination of the English language.

There is actually no such thing as "perfect" English. Language is a medium of communication created by human beings, who are, by their very nature—imperfect. There is, however, an academic standard of acceptable conventions of English which make it possible for the language to function at its peak efficiency—*Standard English*. Thomas J. Farrell offers the following working definition of Standard English:

> Standard English [can be defined as] the standard surface forms of English grammar, which were developed in print culture and which are used in carefully edited publications, and secondarily the lexicon. I emphatically do not mean phonology. I use the following terms as synonyms for Standard English: educated English, the literate language, the language of literacy and literate modes of thought. (166)

I find it significant that Farrell makes the distinction that phonology does not define correct English. It is *not* how words are pronounced that matters, but using the right words in the right order.

I also need to make clear what *I* mean by *corruption* and how it differs from *enrichment*. I see the introduction of new words, from multiple sources, into the English language as enrichment. For example, the verbs *hate*, *dislike*, *despise*, *detest*, *loathe*, *abominate*, and *abhor* all convey a sense of *not liking* something—but do so with subtle differences in meaning. The English language has more words than any other language on Earth—approximately 250,000 distinct words ("Language Statistics"). The fact that English has so many different words from which people can choose gives it great power to invoke many layers of creative expression. What I consider corruption involves the changing of conventions of the spoken language which have been in place for hundreds of years—such as subject-verb agreement, irregular verb conjugations, irregular noun plurals, and rules for possessives. In addition to these conventions of the *spoken* language—spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are frequently inappropriately altered in the *written* language. So if indeed the English language is in danger of corruption, then what is the source of that corruption?

English is, first and foremost, the native language of England. It could be argued that British English is the purest English and that the English spoken elsewhere is, to some degree, corrupt. Because of geographical separation and the introduction of external influences, American English has developed into a new dialect—actually, into a *set* of new dialects. There are, of course, differences between American and British English, but they are not significant enough to hinder effective communication. In my opinion, even

today, the most correct English—in the entire world—is that which is spoken or written in England, by people who have been properly educated in the correct use of the language. Even in England, however, there are many regional and working-class dialects, spoken and written, that are inconsistent with the "Queen's English." There is also a variety of different dialects of the English language spoken and written in "foreign" countries that were once British colonies, such as Australia, Canada—and the United States of America. In my opinion, although there are a few notable differences between Standard British English and Standard American English, they are, for the most part, insignificant.

My father, my two sisters, and their families live in England. When I recently read a newspaper clipping that my sister sent to me about a fire at their home, the only differences I found were a few alternate spellings: "*Neighbours* spoke on Wednesday of how the daughter raised the alarm" and the intermittent absence of articles: "The father and daughter, believed to be American, were not injured and did not have to be *taken to hospital*" (Bloomfield). The most significant difference between American and British English is the way the language is *spoken*. I have encountered several people from England, including my late stepmother, who are of the opinion that Americans, in general, "butcher" their beautiful language. While I greatly admire hearing English as spoken by the English, and consider it a thing of beauty, I do not agree that American Standard English is actually a corruption of the language or less correct—it is just different.

Just as the Anglo-Saxons and later the Normans migrated to England, bringing "foreign" languages with them, the United States has experienced a mass migration of

people into it from all over the world who speak many different languages. How has this migration affected American English?

Most of this immigration, in decades past, has come from Spanish-speaking Latin America. The majority of these immigrants come from Mexico and settle in the Southwestern United States—a five-state region consisting of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. The English spoken by many of these Mexicans over time has come to be known as "Chicano English" (Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia 1). Ilan Stavans states that the word *Chicano*, which refers to people of Mexican background living in the United States, first appeared in 1947 (95); however, some scholars believe the word was used much earlier to describe these people. Rodolfo Acuña states the following:

> The word *Chicano* for many years was a pejorative term whose origin is unknown. It was popularly used by the working class to refer to themselves. Often, however, middle-class Mexicans used it disparagingly—meaning low-class Mexicans. In the late 1960s, youth movements and political activists gave *Chicano* a political connotation— similar to the way *Black* became a more political term for *Negro*. (ix, emphasis added)

For many years, Chicano English was considered nothing more or less than "bad" English. Joyce Penfield and Jacob Ornstein-Galicia cite a 1957 study by Janet Sawyer, who stated that "the English spoken by the bilingual informants [in San Antonio, Texas] was simply an imperfect state in the mastery of English" (34). Researchers formerly explained the differences between Chicano English and Standard English as the result of

imperfectly learning English, in part caused by *interference* from Spanish (16). In the 1970s, researchers observing Chicano English in use in the Southwest began to question the interference model. Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia cite Garland Bills in a 1977 study: "[T]he speech of very many Chicanos appears to exhibit clear signs of temporal stability, structural consistency, and internal (not just external) predictability. In other words, it seems to represent a systematically distinct competence—a dialect" (34). Bills argues that "several linguistic aspects of Chicano English are not predictable from a contrastive analysis of Spanish and English" (34). For example, some speakers of Chicano English pronounce English words that begin with *ch* with a *sh* sound—*check* becomes *sheck*. This variation in pronunciation is not a direct result of the influence of Spanish since most dialects of Spanish do not even have the *sh* sound (34). Based on the arguments presented by Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia, I agree that Chicano English is a distinct dialect of the English language—and not simply "bad" English.

Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia also state that "the uniqueness of Chicano English lies at the phonological level rather than the syntactic level" (35). The words sound differently, but the sentence structure and word order are essentially consistent with Standard English. However, when my Hispanic maintenance man says, "I no can fix until tomorrow," an almost word-for-word translation of "no puedo repararlo hasta mañana," it is incorrect English, caused by interference from Spanish—not an alternate dialect. The interference model is further complicated by the fact that many of these individuals speak very poor Spanish.

Not all English spoken by Mexicans living in the United States, then, is a viable alternate dialect such as Chicano English. Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia cite Fernando Peñalosa who states,

> Chicanos speak two distinct but interrelated kinds of English (in addition to Standard English). One kind is that spoken typically by immigrants from Mexico who have learned English as a second language and show marked interference from Spanish. The other is a fluent kind spoken by many Chicanos as their first language, [which] serves as the only means of communication in Chicano communities where Spanish is no longer spoken. (35-36)

Of course, these two varieties of English are not the only ones spoken by Mexican Americans or other Hispanics. Some of them speak Standard English, and others speak an infinite number of combinations of Chicano English and Spanish-interfered English. Many Mexican Americans, who are bilingual, speak a combination of English and Spanish, known colloquially as *Spanglish* (Stavans 222).

But what is the effect, if any, of any of these alternate varieties of English on Standard American English? One of the most important distinguishing characteristics of Chicano English is its unique "sing-song" quality, which is difficult to describe with words—its *intonation*. Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia state the following:

> [I]ntonational features are useful definers of the parameters of Chicano English since they are seldom shared by Anglos or by Mexican immigrants who are new learners of English. More recent observations in border communities where Anglos typically live and interact in Chicano

communities [reveal that intonation] patterns are the first linguistic

features to spread from Chicano English to the regional varieties of

English spoken by Anglos and other non-Chicanos. (35)

My perception of the effect of Chicano English on "non-Chicanos" is that it is primarily one of amusement. Hispanic comedians such as Cheech Marin, Paul Rodriguez, and George Lopez have perpetrated the stereotype of the Chicano dialect. It is unlikely that people who speak Standard English would change the way they speak because of contact with Chicano English. It is even more unlikely that contact with Hispanics who simply speak poor English would significantly influence speakers of Standard English. I believe that non-Chicanos are aware that Chicanos and other Hispanics speak differently than they do, but for the most part, do not attempt to emulate them.

One of the most influential groups of people living in the United States are African Americans. They have enriched the culture of the United States and the entire world through their contribution to areas such as science, art, music, literature—and language. The variety of English spoken by many African Americans is a dialect known as *African American Vernacular English* or *Black Vernacular English*. Actually, the dialect is known by many different names including *Black American English* or simply *Black English* (Smitherman, *Talkin* 1, 5). John and Russell Rickford call it "Spoken Soul." It would be simplistic to consider English as spoken by many African Americans as a single dialect. In reality, there are many sub-dialects; the English varieties spoken by black people in rural Georgia, Chicago, and southern California are all noticeably different.

African people centuries ago were forcibly brought to the Americas as slaves. Although some historians believe that Africans were brought as slaves to what is now the United States as early as 1526, the first confirmed incident was in 1619 at the Jamestown colony in Virginia (Rickford and Rickford 131). The importation of African slaves was outlawed in 1808 (138), but slavery continued until 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery everywhere in the United States (139). The enslavement of the African people is indeed one of the darkest chapters in the history of the world. Even after the slavery era ended in the nineteenth century, they were not treated as equals, and their lives were very difficult. These events are historical facts and are not in dispute. However, the discrimination experienced by African Americans is not within the scope of this thesis; I am primarily concerned with the effect of African American dialects on Standard English.

In *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, Geneva Smitherman observes that we do not have audio recordings or any "direct speech samples" of early Black American English; we therefore must rely on "reconstructions of black talk based on indirect evidence, such as representations of black dialect in white and black American literature, and written reproductions of the dialect in journals, diaries, letters, etc. which were written by whites" (5). Smitherman offers the following explanation regarding the evolution of the Black American English dialect:

> African slaves in America initially developed a *pidgin*, a language of
> transaction, that was used in communication between themselves and
> whites. Over the years, the pidgin gradually became widespread among
> slaves and evolved into a *creole*. Developed without benefit of any formal

instruction, [. . .] this lingo involved the substitution of English for West

African words, but within the same basic structure and idiom that

characterized West African language patterns. (5, emphasis added)

Smitherman gives several examples of grammar and structure rules of West African

languages "that were grafted into early Black English and which still operate in Black

English today"—such as the repetition of noun subject with pronoun: "My father, he

work" (6). Smitherman also notes phonetic phenomena such as the absence of the *r* sound

in West African languages, which results in English words which end in *r*, such as *store,*

more, and door being rendered as *stoe, moe, and doe* (7).

However, not all of the black slaves came directly from Africa. Slaves were also

imported to the United States from the Caribbean, where they had lived for several

generations and were already speaking local creoles influenced by French, Spanish, and

other languages (Rickford and Rickford 132-33). Although there is evidence of the

significant contribution of West African languages and Caribbean creoles on Black

English, there were other noteworthy influences. For example, black slaves came into

contact with British settlers, who were indentured servants from peasant or low-class

social groups likely to have been speaking nonstandard vernaculars rather than Standard

English. There is evidence of specific linguistic patterns that originate from southern

British dialects, such as that of Sussex, which survive in modern Black English (147-48).

There are, no doubt, many diverse influences that came together to create African

American Vernacular English.

Regardless of the origin of this vernacular, is it truly a viable alternative to

Standard English, or is it a corrupted form of English that actually poses a threat to the

integrity of the language? I think it is fair to apply the definition that Garland Bills uses to grant Chicano English status as a dialect. Does African American Vernacular English "exhibit clear signs of temporal stability, structural consistency, and internal predictability [and] represent a systematically distinct competence?" (Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia 34). I will concede that African American Vernacular English is fairly consistent within these parameters. I have heard the same alternate applications of these concepts, as compared to Standard English, from many African Americans. If, in fact, speakers of African American Vernacular English make grammar and usage errors, they consistently make the same errors. *My* definition of corruption of the English language, which I stated earlier in this chapter, is the "changing of conventions of the language— such as subject-verb agreement, irregular verb conjugations, irregular plural nouns, and possessives." In Black English, alternate subject-verb agreements are common: "*Does* you know where Martin is?" Verb conjugations, which are irregular in Standard English, become regular: "I *seed* him this morning." Likewise, irregular plural nouns become regular: "He was on the corner with the other *mans*." Also, possessives are simplified; the *'s* is often omitted entirely: "He walked down the street past my *Grandma* house."

Because of this inner consistency, African American Vernacular English satisfies Bills' criteria for being considered a distinct dialect. However, just as not all English spoken by Mexicans living in the United States is a viable alternate dialect such as Chicano English, not all English spoken by all Black Americans should be considered an alternate dialect; sometimes it simply has to be *bad English*.

John Baugh, a socio-linguist from Stanford University, makes the following statement in defense of Black English:

Many native speakers of Standard English assume that nonstandard

speakers are ignorant, lazy, and less capable intellectually. The common

stereotype is that nonstandard speakers, including many blacks, could

speak "properly" if only they put forth sufficient effort. This view, while

perhaps understandable, is woefully uninformed and simplistic. It fails to

recognize the unique status of African American Vernacular English or the

linguistic consequences of slavery. [. . .] Historically, it was illegal to

teach slaves to read and write, effectively denying them access to literate

Standard English; this unfortunate fact has also deepened the linguistic

abyss between African American Vernacular English and Standard

English. (4-5)

Along the same lines, Beverly J. Moss states the following: "When I read about or

hear about the many negative portraits painted of literacy and language in African

American communities, I think about my own experience growing up in and participating

in African American communities where there is much evidence of rich, complex literacy

and language skills in use" (3). I find it quite ironic that Baugh and Moss, like many

African American scholars, passionately defend African American Vernacular English,

proclaiming it a viable alternative to Standard English, but they do so using very eloquent

Standard English. In November 2008, Barack Obama was elected the first African

American president of the United States. While I do not agree with most of Obama's

political views, I find him a powerful speaker and an effective communicator who has

mastered Standard English. I firmly believe Obama could not have won this election and

been capable of being a world leader if he could not speak and write Standard English

well. Consider this excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC:

> But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. (King)

When Dr. King spoke these words, he did so with the strength and majesty of Standard English. His message was directed not only to the African Americans who were there that day, but to the entire world. In my opinion, if he had spoken in African American Vernacular English, he would not have been taken seriously by whites and other non-African Americans, when it is quite clear that unity among peoples of different skin colors was the intended theme of his message.

While I can understand and empathize with the position of those who believe Black English, especially as a *written* form, is a viable alternative to Standard English, I must—with all due respect—disagree. Although some African Americans *speak* a distinct dialect, known among linguists as African American Vernacular English, much of the English spoken and written by black Americans is corrupted English that excuses every conceivable abuse of the language by rationalizing it as ethnic diversity. Consider

the following passage from an Internet blog that was posted in response to a lawsuit resulting from the firing by Saks Fifth Avenue of an African American woman:

> go for it girl, make them pay for being racial. you didn't chose to be you color and you are proud to be who you are no matter what they say or do just like they are proud of their. you were created by God and ressemble to him. so if any body has a problem with that, they should go and ask God not discriminating anyone. sue their asses and feel good doing it!
>
> ("Stamford")

I find it entirely inappropriate to attempt to legitimize such writing as this under a politically correct umbrella of "alternate dialect"—this is nothing more and nothing less than *bad English*.

There is a manifestation of African American society which has evolved in the past several decades and which is known as *hip-hop* or *rap music*. This expression of popular culture is responsible for the emergence of many negative stereotypes of a subgroup of African Americans, known as "gangstas"—individuals who advocate violation of the law, including drug use and distribution, robbery, and the murder of police. Most of the fans and even many of the performers of hip-hop are "wannabes" who admire the "bad boy" image, but in actuality are quite ordinary. Extreme disrespect for women and contempt for most of the conventions of American society, including the English language, are characteristics of this gangsta persona. The hip-hop phenomenon has evolved beyond the confines of race and is now accepted, admired, and performed by young people from non-black populations such as Caucasians, Hispanics and Asians in

the United States and throughout the world. I discuss hip-hop in greater detail in Chapter IV.

There are some people, upon reading my statement that Black English and hip-hop are a threat to the integrity of Standard English, who would consider me racist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I believe *everyone should be treated equally* and held to the *same* standard in pedagogical environments. I believe "lowering the bar" and not expecting African American students to achieve the same level of linguistic competence as that of white students is true racism. To me, this sounds like they are saying that black students are incapable of learning Standard English, so we have to make special accommodations for them. The position that African American Vernacular English should be considered of equal value to Standard English and that they should exist on a parallel level seems to me dangerously close to the *separate but equal* philosophy that resulted in *white only* and *colored only* drinking fountains and restrooms.

African American Vernacular English historically came into being because of slavery. This dialect is fundamentally linked to human suffering and oppression. It has, for many years, represented an inferior status for a people who have worked long and hard to achieve equality in society. A few black friends have told me that there is no way I can understand the "black experience" because I am white. They may be right because I cannot imagine wanting to cling to a dialect associated with the oppression of my ancestors.

There is another form of racism associated with the question of alternate dialects—anti-white racism. Many African Americans, particularly young people who are vulnerable to peer pressure, consider Standard English "White English" and are resistant

to learning it because they would be "selling out" and disrespecting their own cultural identity. English is not a "white" language—it is just a language. English was originally native to England. The indigenous inhabitants who created it were light-skinned people. That does not mean that English, or any other language, can be spoken properly only by people of any certain race. To suggest such a thing is racism. Thomas J. Farrell states the following:

> It is an expression of anti-white racism to identify Standard English with whites [and to claim that it is] racist to require non-white students to learn Standard English. Standard English as such is race-neutral or race-independent in the sense that whether or not one can learn it does not depend on one's race. Educated blacks in various parts of the world have learned Standard English, and so have other non-whites who have learned to read and write English well. [. . .] [T]his demonstrates that Standard English is not intrinsically connected with being white. (168)

Theoretically, diversity is highly prized in our society. But when does diversity become division? Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is considered one of the greatest African American leaders in American history. Millions of black Americans regard him as a role model. But do they really understand his message? Consider his words from his "I Have a Dream" speech:

> The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to

realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. [. . .] I have a dream that one day [. . .], the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. [. . .] I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. [. . .] I have a dream that [. . .] one day [. . .] little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. (King)

I firmly believe that Dr. King never envisioned a political movement to legitimize a dialect created by the experience of slavery and which continues to hold his people in linguistic bondage.

As much as I may dream, as did Dr. King, of the unity of mankind, the harsh reality is that people continue to divide themselves in the name of diversity. When I was employed as a substitute teacher, for instance, I was privy to some softly-spoken conversations in the teacher's lounge regarding the fate of Standard English. Frequently, these conversations were abruptly ended when certain people entered the room. Since I have been in graduate school, I have spoken to several of my fellow graduate students who teach in public schools and who have expressed similar observations. Apparently, some of our public school districts are now more concerned with cultural sensitivity than with providing students with a quality education. Some public school districts increasingly embrace alternate dialects of the English language as acceptable alternatives to Standard English. In these school districts, if a high school English teacher corrects a student who says "I be goin to my friend house" or "I no can fix until tomorrow," that

teacher could be reprimanded for insulting the student's cultural identity. Some teachers may be hesitant to correct grammar and usage errors in written work that reflects ethnic dialects. As a result, some teachers no longer teach their students how to speak or write using the conventions of Standard English.

Although many teachers may still support the teaching of Standard English, some elementary, secondary, and even college teachers apparently agree with the acceptance of alternate dialects, or at least consider it necessary in certain rhetorical situations. In 1974, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, in Anaheim, California, English teachers voted 79-20 in favor of a resolution on the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (Farrell 166). This resolution included the following statement:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. ("Students' Right")

I can only respond to this statement, written in beautiful Standard English, by saying that I disagree with it and would have voted with the minority in opposition of it—for reasons already stated.

Nonstandard English dialects have gained popularity and political influence, in part, because of the influence of popular culture. Hip-hop, a popular music genre, has had a profound effect on not only the African American community but the European American community, and other non-black communities as well. Nonstandard dialects have even spread to the educational arena, and are considered by growing numbers of educators to be viable alternatives to Standard English. There are so many varieties of English extant in the world today, that the result is a cacophony of conflicting voices that often results in linguistic anarchy. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the Internet—especially *user-generated content* sites. All of the varieties of English: standard and nonstandard dialects, and every conceivable and inconceivable aberration of the language are presented with an equal voice. I discuss the effect of user-generated content Internet sites in greater detail in Chapter IV.

I chose my thesis title very carefully: "Does It Really Matter?" A more detailed version of the thesis title question would be: "Does using Standard English, which includes correct spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage, *really matter*, or are these concepts irrelevant in the twenty-first century because the English language has evolved into a informal language in which these conventions, which are now regarded seriously only by white people in academia, are archaic and no longer necessary?"

After this first chapter, Introduction, Chapter II, "A Defense of Standard English," addresses such questions as:

1. What is Standard English?

2. Does Standard English even exist?

3. Is Standard English necessary or desirable?

4. Is Standard English a phenomenon of white people?

5. Is Standard English inherently racist or ethnically exclusive?

Chapter III, "Components of Correct English," examines component parts of correct English, as they exist in three broad categories: features unique to spoken English, features of both spoken and written English, and features unique to written English. I will address issues such as phonology, grammar, usage, diction, style, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. In Chapter IV, I discuss influences of the postmodern world which have a *detrimental* effect on the English language. I identify what I believe to be the greatest threats to the English language: nonstandard English dialects, hip-hop and user generated Internet sites. Finally, in Chapter V, I return to my original question: "Does it really matter?" and expound upon that philosophical question in light of the conclusions I have drawn from my research.

CHAPTER II

A DEFENSE OF STANDARD ENGLISH

Many language scholars have contrasting opinions about Standard English. In 1934, for instance, Thomas A. Knott wrote the following:

> For the purposes of this discussion I shall describe Standard English as that form of the language used by professional writers; or, to be more exact, Standard English is that aggregate of forms, idioms, patterns, words, phrases, and usages, which has been in part inherited and adopted, and in large part devised, cultivated, and perfected, by the aggregate of the long succession of professional literary composers whose oral, manuscript, and printed work constitutes the body of English literature in the broadest sense. (83)

Alan Davies cites Randolph Quirk regarding the generic nature of Standard English, stating in 1990 that it "is the English we take for granted, which is not strange or unusual or different in any way—what is sometimes referred to as the 'unmarked variety'—[there is] nothing esoteric, obscure, or special about it. Whoever or wherever we are in the English speaking world, we have been familiar with it all our lives" (171). Davies then cites the definition of Standard English that he finds in *Webster's Third Dictionary*:

> 1. English that is taught in school,

2. English that is current, reputable and national,

3. English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well-established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood. (172)

Davies further cites Quirk who states the following:

When we speak of learning to write, we really have in mind learning to write Standard English. This distinction is not universal, but it is one frequently made, that Standard English refers to the written language and not the spoken. […] Standard English is particularly associated with the English that is intended to have the widest reach, and in consequence it is traditionally associated most of all with English in […] a printed form. (172)

Thomas J. Farrell, in "A Defense for Requiring Standard English," offers the following:

Standard English [can be defined as] the standard surface forms of English grammar, which were developed in print culture and which are used in carefully edited publications […]. The following terms [are applicable] as synonyms for Standard English: educated English, the literate language, the language of literacy and literate modes of thought. (166)

However, Standard English is a subjective concept. There are some people who deny the very existence of Standard English—claiming that the dialect known as

Standard English is only one of many dialects of the English language, that is no more

correct or legitimate than any other of the hundreds of dialects and subdialects spoken or

written all over the world and that it is, in fact, a dialect contrived by white elitists to

assert superiority and domination over people of color and other minorities. It is the

opinion of some scholars that it is inherently racist to believe that a Standard English

dialect, which is more correct than any other dialect, in fact exists and should be taught to

all students, regardless of race or ethnicity. The debate over the existence of a Standard

English dialect, and its implied superiority, has become a politically-charged issue that

divides pedagogical philosophy into liberal and conservative factions.

     James Sledd, in "Product in Process: From Ambiguities of Standard English to

Issues That Divide Us," states the following:

> Standard written English, we of the U.S.A. are assured by eminent
>
> authorities, is a classless and unchanging grapholect, a public idiom in
>
> worldwide use which is presently our unofficial official language and
>
> which promises to remain almost unchanged, because "we" want it to, as
>
> long as our civilization also remains. It is more useful, however, and more
>
> accurate, to speak of standardization in the interactive media of both
>
> speech and writing and to speak of Standard English not as changeless but
>
> as a product in constant process. The constantly changing spoken and
>
> written language which the dominant call standard is a creation and
>
> instrument of the dominant for purposes of domination. (169-70)

I have never argued that Standard English is a static "memorial in stone." It is a

nondebatable reality that Standard English has experienced many phases of modification

in past centuries. In some situations, Standard English has evolved and changed more than some of the English subdialects. For example, when a "hillbilly" man from Tennessee says, "I am *afeared*" or refers to his relatives as his *kinfolk*, he is using words which are now archaic in Standard English. What I am questioning is whether or not specific changes in contemporary English, often first used in regional or ethnic dialects and so common that they begin to infiltrate Standard English, are desirable or if they should be resisted.

Sledd considers the process of domination of the majority by an elitist minority to exist as a problem not only in the United States, but as a worldwide problem wherever English is spoken:

> World English is still primarily the language of the dominant, too often inaccessible to the majority; and more diverse and less widely intelligible varieties range downward, as the dominant would judge, to pidgins and creoles. The condemnation of the nonstandard dialects of English and of the English-based pidgins and creoles, though often shared by their own speakers, ignores the fact that no language and no variety of any language would survive if it did not serve some purposes for some people better than any other language or variety serves them. It is an arrogant absurdity for the dominant minority to despise the languages and language-varieties of the majority, in which most of the world's work gets done. (171)

The first thing I notice about Sledd's commentary on the "arrogant absurdity [of the] dominant minority" to insist upon the use of Standard English is that Sledd writes these words using what I would consider very eloquent Standard English. James Hinton

Sledd was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1914 and received degrees from Emory University, Oxford University, and the University of Texas at Austin. He taught at Duke University, the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, Northwestern University, and the University of Texas at Austin ("In Memoriam"). Ironically, Sledd himself was an eminent member of the "dominant minority" of which he was frequently critical in many of his writings.

Sometimes, groups of like-minded teachers come to a consensus regarding the question of Standard English. In 1974, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, in Anaheim, California, English teachers voted 79-20 in favor of a resolution on the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (Farrell 166). This resolution included the following statement:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. ("Students' Right")

I find the statement that "language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity" particularly arrogant. The writers of this resolution have taken it upon themselves to make a blanket statement that allegedly speaks for all language scholars everywhere. By proclaiming "a standard American dialect" to be a "myth," they are declaring their theoretical politically-charged position to be the ultimate truth. Under the guise of honoring diversity and equality for all people, they have

declared their position to be the only correct one. By stating that all students should have the "right to their own patterns and varieties of language," the writers of this resolution are basically saying that all students should be able to speak and write the English language any way they please and that there is no right or wrong as long as "they find their own identity and style" in doing so. This sentiment is primarily expressed on behalf of students identified with minority ethnic groups—in particular, African Americans and Hispanic Americans. This mind-set could logically be applied to all other minority groups, such as Asians, or students from the Middle East—basically, everyone except white Americans of European descent.

There are several reasons that some college freshmen are unable to speak and write using Standard English. I will concede, for the sake of argument, that there are many students from minority groups who are not fluent in Standard English because of socioeconomic factors unrelated to their basic intelligence or their ability to complete college-level work. The most obvious of these reasons is the lack of modeling of Standard English in their home environments. Unfortunately, some people who wish to get a college education, regardless of their race or ethnicity, simply lack the intelligence and self-discipline to succeed. College is not for everyone and is not an inalienable right.

What about the white students who are not part of an identifiable racial, ethnic, social, or cultural group? There is a plethora of very bad English spoken and written by white Americans. There are white students, as well as minorities, who begin their college career with a less than desirable command of Standard English, who are expected to be proficient nonetheless and who do not have an ethnic justification for failing to do so. Do generic white students also have the "right to their own patterns and varieties of

language" based upon "the dialects of their nurture […] in which they find their own identity and style"? Are white students allowed to refuse to learn the conventions of Standard English because they grew up speaking *Redneck Trailer Park Vernacular*? There be lots of white folks what talk real ignrunt and cant spel worth a durn neither cause they didnt get none that proper book learnin cept what they got in school where there teachers wernt much smarter than they was. I grew up in an environment where it was not uncommon to hear things like "I seen." When my teacher told me that the correct usage was "I saw" or "I have seen," I trusted and believed her, and I never for a moment considered the possibility that she was attempting to berate or demean me.

In "Writing and White Privilege: Beyond Basic Skills," Susan Naomi Bernstein describes herself as "a white woman from a middle-class family" (130) who was called upon to teach writing to students who were "native speakers of Spanish, Urdu, Vietnamese, and Black English Vernacular—languages that were inseparable from culture […] [and therefore] inseparable from race" (128). Bernstein cites one of her students, a white male, "from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background," the only white student in a class of twenty-two, who wrote a hip-hop styled poem about "one big plot" perpetrated by the public school system to force him to conform to the conventions of written Standard English for the sole purpose of performing well on state-mandated standardized testing, which having failed to do so, caused him to be placed in a remedial college freshman writing class (129). Bernstein observes the following:

> In order to succeed on state-sponsored tests, students must write in
> "standard" English, a marker of the "educated" middle class. Lack of
> demonstrated fluency with this "standard" becomes reason enough to

designate a student as "remedial" and unable to complete the requirements

for a college degree. […] As a result, [these] students continue to occupy

the position of "other," as outsider[s] to the "mainstream" culture of white,

middle-class schooling. (130)

Since Bernstein chooses the one white student in her class to use as an example of this

perceived bias, in her case, she apparently does not intend to make this an issue of race

but of *any* student not found to conform to the standards of the mainstream.

While I do not agree that requiring all students to learn to write using Standard

English is a plot to demean them, the concept of the school system "plotting" against

students in order to subjugate them and exert mind control is a common one—sometimes

based on reality—sometimes paranoid delusion. An example from popular culture is

found in the lyrics of the song "Another Brick in the Wall" by Pink Floyd: "We don't

need no education/ We don't need no thought control/ No dark sarcasm in the classroom/

Teacher leave them kids alone" (Pink Floyd).

Although in many cases, such conspiracies exist only in the imagination of some

students, and even of some teachers, there are some pedagogical philosophies that I

believe to be genuinely overt manifestations of intended "thought control." For example,

Patricia Bizzell, in "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know

about Writing," states that "our teaching task is not only to convey information but also

to transform students' whole world view" (479). I emphatically disagree with Bizzell's

premise—writing teachers should teach their students how *to write*—not "transform

[their] world view." While it is true that in the process of teaching rhetorical methods of

forming arguments, it is necessary to address cognitive concerns—it is possible to teach

students *how* to think without teaching them *what* to think. I find it inappropriate that any teacher would attempt to "transform students' whole world view" in any writing class—no matter what type of ideology is being promoted to students. In this case, I agree with Pink Floyd—"leave them kids alone."

While I acknowledge that there may be actual conspiracies being perpetrated against students in the pedagogical environment, I do not believe the promotion of Standard English for the purposes of academic and formal writing to be one of them. I honestly believe that the expectation that *all* students learn to speak and write Standard English, including "remedial" classes in the college writing curriculum, is an attempt to *elevate* students—to make it possible for them to succeed in their college studies and in their future professional lives.

I have personal experience with remedial college classes—in mathematics. While I have always had reasonable success studying English and other liberal arts subjects, I remember struggling with math as early as the fourth grade when we were introduced to the "multiplication tables." I performed very poorly in the seventh and eighth grades, which caused me to be placed in a remedial math class in the ninth grade. Unfortunately, my classmates in this particular ninth grade math class were primarily students with behavioral problems, and in one incident, a fellow student broke my jaw. Apparently, my math skills improved somewhat because I completed high school algebra and geometry with at least average grades. I did not take any math classes during my first attempt at college studies. When I returned to my undergraduate career, at age 32, I apparently scored very poorly on the math aptitude test. I was again placed in remedial math classes.

At Austin Community College, I took classes in Basic Mathematics, Pre-Algebra, Beginning Algebra, and Intermediate Algebra.

When I eventually took my undergraduate College Algebra class at Texas State University, I earned an "A" in the class. I honestly believe that I had such difficulty with math, not because I was "stupid," but because I simply did not acquire the skills I needed for success during my public school years. Perhaps I was unfortunate enough to have had several consecutive incompetent math teachers, but at this point, all I know is that I did not acquire the skills. I am extremely grateful that Austin Community College made these remedial classes available to me. If I had not taken these classes, I would have never been able to earn my B.A. and ultimately my M.A. I see no fundamental difference between my experience with remedial math classes and that of students required to take remedial writing classes. Neither is an indictment of a student's lack of intelligence, but simply a lack of prerequisite skills necessary for success in a college-level class.

In "English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don't Do?" Geneva Smitherman identifies a dichotomy that exists between black and white cultures:

> Black culture is diametrically opposed to white middle class culture. Witness, for example, the ghetto culture's hair styles, mannerisms, patterns of dress, dance, etc. […] On a larger scale, note the conflict between value systems wherein the ghetto's pimps, hustlers, and sundry other brothers into an "illegit" thang are idealized and respected. The Black youth must decide is he gon square up and join the mainstream or get super-hip and remain in the street thang? (62)

Smitherman further states:

> In all fairness, I suppose, one must credit many such correctionist English teachers for the *misguided notion* that they are readying Black students for the world (read: white America). The rationale is that this world is one in which Black kids must master the prestige dialect if they are to partake of that socioeconomic mobility for which America is world renowned […] The student who submits a paper with frequent "I be's" and multiple negatives is forced to "correct," write and rewrite towards the end of achieving a grammatically flawless piece. In this painstaking and almost always *useless and insignificant process*, little else is stressed. (59, emphasis added)

Smitherman takes the position that there many aspects of good writing which are far more important than grammar, usage, spelling, and other mechanical errors. She maintains that "audiences are moved by message and style of delivery […] which have nothing to do with the English teacher's 'mania for correctness'" (64). Smitherman cites a specific example from a freshman writing class where students were asked to respond to the following prompt: "Take a position on the war in Viet Nam and present arguments to defend your position." A "black college freshman" offered the following: "I think the war in Viet Nam bad. Because we don't have no business over there. My brother friend been in the war, and he say it hard and mean. I do not like war because it bad. And so I don't think we have no business there. The reason the war in China is bad is that American boys is dying over there" (65).

I can only hope that this is an excerpt from a longer essay, and not the entire essay. There are obviously several surface errors from the perspective of Standard English; however, there are many other problems. The tone and diction of the excerpt are quite simplistic and not what one would reasonably expect from a college freshman. If I were to read this excerpt without being told who wrote it, I would surmise that it was written at approximately the sixth grade level. Smitherman's essay was written in 1972, during the Viet Nam War era. The prompt instructed the students to "take a position on the war in Viet Nam," which would indicate an expectation of a response a bit more profound than "it bad." The prompt also instructed the students "to present arguments to defend [their] position[s]"—which suggests a more detailed response than "the reason the war […] is bad is that American boys is dying over there."

Smitherman is horrified that the only comments offered to the student by his or her teacher were in reference to the grammar mistakes (65). Smitherman cites Don Lee's identification of several examples of crucial elements of effective writing: "emphasis on content and message, logical development, use of supporting details and examples, analysis and arrangement, style, specificity, variation of word choice, sentence structure, and originality"—which Smitherman considers as the "*real* components of rhetorical power" (64). I agree with her that there are many serious issues in writing instruction that must be addressed; I will even concede that these issues may be ultimately more important—but I cannot agree with her position that surface errors are trivial and are of little or no importance. In fact, I believe that because surface errors are more *objective*, they are more easily dealt with and therefore should be addressed *before* focusing on the more difficult, *subjective* rhetorical concerns that Smitherman identifies.

Smitherman, who is perfectly capable of writing Standard English, sometimes reverts to African American Vernacular English—apparently to make a point: "[F]requently we find even Black students themselves with a negative image of *they* speech. They too have been brainwashed about the 'inherent and absolute rightness' of white, middle class dialect and do not realize that language can be/has been for Black people in America a tool of oppression" (63, emphasis added). In this particular case, the word *they* is used inappropriately in this context; the correct word, in Standard English, would be *their*. I find it incongruous for Smitherman to interrupt a stream of coherent Standard English prose with an ethnic-dialect possessive pronoun—just to make a not-so-subtle political point.

Sometimes Smitherman invents alternate simplified spellings of existing English words in an attempt to create a written form of African American Vernacular. For example, in *Word for the Mother: Language and African Americans*, Smitherman spells the word *school* as *skool* (38). If Smitherman felt compelled to make the word *school* a phonetically perfect word, she also should have created phonetically perfect equivalents for *all* of the thousands of nonphonetic words in the English language. We all must eventually accept the reality that English is *not* an entirely phonetic language; sometimes words are not spelled as they sound. Perhaps the correct spelling of the word *school* is too Germanic—and therefore too "white" for Smitherman's comfort zone.

African American Vernacular English is a *spoken* dialect created by centuries of oral tradition—there is no *written* version of this dialect with alternate spellings for non-phonetic English words—except in Smitherman's imagination. I have read a great deal of Smitherman's scholarship on the dialect she usually calls *Black English*. I conclude that

she is very intelligent and is passionately dedicated to sociolinguistic research—her life's work. However, she is not objective when it comes to race and race relations. By her own admission, she believes that expecting African American college students to conform to the same conventions of grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling to which *all* students are expected to conform— represents "a tool of oppression" ("English Teacher" 63). This viewpoint is evidenced by the following statement: "As a daughter of the Black ghetto myself, don't seem like it's no reason the teacher be doing none of that correctin' mess. After all, what do you want—good grammar or good sense?" (60). Ironically, the Standard English dialect toward which Smitherman expresses such disdain, and that she considers to be a tool of oppression, is the dialect that she uses so eloquently in her scholarly writing. Smitherman found it necessary to master Standard English in order to achieve her own academic pursuits—and yet she expresses hatred for a dialect that has made it possible to be in a position to proclaim that hatred.

Many African Americans, successful in careers that require communication with people outside of their own ethnic group, such as politicians and other public figures, speak and write Standard English. In Chapter I of this thesis, I provided two excerpts from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. As I previously stated, it is my opinion that by writing and then speaking these words in Standard English, Dr. King's message was received, as it was intended, by the entire world—not just people of color who were only fluent in African American Vernacular English.

Another more contemporary example of an African American public figure, who effectively uses Standard English, is Mark Mallory, who, at the time of this writing, is the

mayor of Cincinnati, Ohio. Mallory recently was featured on *Undercover Boss*, a television program in which authority figures such as business owners and CEOs go undercover in their own companies to observe what really happens in the work environment when the employees do not know the boss is watching ("City"). In Mallory's case, he went undercover in four city employee positions of the city of Cincinnati: sanitation worker, youth center counselor, public vehicle mechanic, and parking enforcement officer.

Because he has recognizable, well-known features, Mallory disguises his appearance by wearing glasses, prosthetic facial hair, a "fat suit," and a dreadlock wig. However, not only is his appearance well known, his voice is as well, so he attempts to alter his voice, including his use of dialect. The dialect Mallory grew up speaking, with which he is most comfortable is Standard English. Consider the following transcribed excerpts:

> I think that I have a very recognizable face. Everywhere that television signals go, people tend to know who I am. On any given day, you will see me doing press conferences, going to ribbon cuttings, going to groundbreakings. I'll be at receptions, at luncheons, at dinners, so, it's going to be really challenging to keep people from knowing who I am. […] I'm not going to have the luxury of going away in order to do *Undercover Boss*; I still have to be the mayor while I'm doing these jobs. So, this is going to be quite a balancing act. Obviously, I'm still going to have my cell phone and will be able to use that, but there's certain things I won't be able to talk about in front of other people. […] My staff is always

going to know where I am, and if something arises, they're going to come

to me and we're going to deal with it right then. ("City")

Mallory's entire family, in fact, speaks Standard English quite fluently and comfortably, although sometimes with an informal tone appropriate for the context. I noticed the slight presence of African American cadence and intonation, but they were definitely *not* speaking an ethnic dialect. At a family dinner, when Mallory announced his plans to appear on *Undercover Boss*, his mother commented: "Now you know you've got to change the way you speak […] just tone down the 'proper' English" ("City"). I believe that she was, to some extent, mocking "proper" English in her comment. Throughout the entire program, Mallory's attempt to "tone down" his natural use of Standard English and imitate an ethnic dialect while undercover was not entirely successful—and was somewhat humorous.

Many African Americans, who are not public figures or professional educators, but are, in fact, ordinary people who live ordinary lives, do not speak ethnic dialects. Their use of the English language may not be perfect, but it is no less perfect than average Americans—including white Americans. *BlackPast.org* published an article about *Ebony*, which is described as

a pictorial news magazine […], [which] first appeared in November 1945.

Created by John H. Johnson, who modeled his publication after *Life*

magazine, *Ebony* celebrated African American life and culture by

depicting the achievements of black Americans. It honored black identity

by portraying black life, refuting stereotypes, and inspiring readers to

overcome racial and other barriers to success. […] Ebony provided a

much-needed national forum for blacks. Its contents centered on black

history, entertainment, business, health, personalities, occupations, and

sports. By highlighting the accomplishments of black Americans, the

magazine offered its readers new measurements of black success.

("Ebony")

In order to "honor black identity" and to "inspire readers to overcome racial and

other barriers to success," articles are written in Standard English. Consider the following

excerpt from *Ebony* about an upcoming rap concert tour:

This year's *Rock The Bells* festival promises to be akin to a delicious

hip-hop summer camp. Earlier this week, the lineup for the much

anticipated concert series was revealed, and fans who can make it out to

one of the four announced dates will get an earful of some of the best

music to hit airwaves in the last 20 years. […] Festival co-founder Chang

Weisberg announced only four dates—two in California, one in New York

and another in Boston. That's disappointing to Chicagoans and Detroiters

who are used to being a stop on the RTB tour. However all is not lost, says

Weisberg, who hopes to turn Rock The Bells into a singular national

festival. ("Rock")

Considering the many successful African Americans who have mastered Standard

English and use it in both their professional and personal lives, for them, Standard

English has *not* been a "tool of oppression" or has *not* represented "domination" by a

white elitist culture. Davies cites John Honey's statement that his "defense of Standard

English against its enemies turns the apothegm 'language is power' on its head by

arguing that Standard English does not disempower the weak, as its critics maintain, but rather empowers them" (171). Davies further summarizes Honey's argument:

> 1. Every child in a mother tongue English school has the right to become active in Standard English. To assume that there is an alternative such as the child's own home language or dialect is to neglect that the purpose of the school is to widen the child's opportunities.
>
> 2. Far from disabling the child by stigmatizing his/her home variety, the teaching of Standard English enfranchises the child.
>
> 3. Those critics who take the Strong Ebonics or similar position are […] betraying their own privileged position […]—they claim that all varieties of English are equal while ignoring the security of their own command of Standard English. (177)

Smitherman maintains that it is racist to require *all* students, regardless of race or ethnicity, to become fluent in spoken and written Standard English because it is a *white* dialect—and therefore a "tool of oppression" ("English Teacher" 63). While it is true that the English language began in England about 1500 years ago and has its roots in the culture of the Anglo-Saxons and other light-skinned peoples, it is not necessarily true that the English that is spoken and written *today* by educated people is a dialect which is, in any way, exclusive to white people or that it is intended to demean African Americans or any other racial or ethnic minority. I believe it is racist to assume that Standard English is indelibly associated only with white people or white culture. Thomas J. Farrell states the following:

> The charge of racism […] has been leveled against those who advocate
> […] that all students, regardless of race, be required to learn the standard
> service forms of English grammar used in most books, including the
> standard forms of the verb "to be." […] I maintain that this is the only
> truly non-racist position, […] [and that] the failure to require students to
> learn Standard English is, in effect, racist. […] [A] real anti-black racist
> [would] discourage black ghetto students from becoming literate, as real
> anti-black racists actually did in the nineteenth century by effectively
> forbidding most blacks to learn to read and write. […] It is [racist] to
> identify Standard English with whites [and to claim that it is] racist to
> require non-white students to learn Standard English. Standard English
> […] is race-neutral or race-independent in the sense that whether or not
> one can learn it does not depend on one's race. Educated blacks in various
> parts of the world have learned Standard English, and so have other non-
> whites who have learned to read and write English well. [. . .] [T]his
> demonstrates that Standard English is not intrinsically connected with
> being white. (167-68)

The teaching of Standard English was *never* intended as a "tool of oppression" to dominate or demean anyone—but to elevate and improve the lives of *all* of the students who study it—without regard to their race or ethnicity. I also agree with Farrell's position that Standard English is not a dialect associated only with white people.

I envision Standard English as the trunk of a tree with many branches. The many varieties of English give the language great diversity which serves to enrich it and

bestows great beauty upon it. The use of these dialects is appropriate within their own contexts—primarily spoken conversations and written depictions of spoken dialogue, such as is found in literature. I do not claim I exclusively use Standard English in my own everyday spoken conversations. However, I firmly believe that Standard English alone should be taught in writing classes and used in academic writing, and writing which will be read by a wide variety of people—including newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and road signs or other advertisements. Standard English should be regarded as the most correct form of the language extant in the civilized English-speaking world, and as such, should be protected from corruption from regional and ethnic English dialects.

In this chapter, I identified the dialect known as Standard English as what I considered to be correct English. Having done so, it should be apparent from this point forward that when I refer to the English language, I am referring to the language as defined by Knox, Davies, Quirk and Farrell, whom I cited in this chapter—which is usually known as Standard English. In Chapter III, the next chapter, I identify several component parts of Standard English and how they work together, both objectively and subjectively, to produce the end result of the English language.

CHAPTER III

COMPONENTS OF STANDARD ENGLISH

In this chapter, I examine component parts of Standard English. There are basically three categories of these components which I will consider: those applicable only to spoken English, such as phonology; those applicable to both spoken and written English, such as grammar, usage, diction, and style; and those applicable only to written English, such as capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and words that are phonetically or orthographically identical, or at least similar, but are actually different words. Although the primary focus of the pedagogy of freshman college English classes, and this thesis, is *written* English, the role of *spoken* English cannot be denied. Since written English is a graphic representation of the spoken language, there are aspects of spoken English that have a profound effect on written English. Many of the common errors found in written English are the result of confusion created by the pronunciation of certain words in the spoken language.

Spoken English

Spoken language is primal and has existed long before mankind developed the ability to record language in a graphic form. Until the twentieth century, relatively few native speakers of English worldwide knew how to read or write. Many Americans, as recently as my grandparents' generation, who were born in the early twentieth century, did not complete more than two or three years of school, if that. For example, I had a

great aunt, born in 1900, who dropped out of school in the second grade because she was left-handed and her teacher was trying to force her to write with her right hand.

In "The Roots of Modern Writing Instruction: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain," Winifred Horner reports that , in England and Scotland, English reading and writing skills were not taught at all in schools until about three hundred years ago (35). English literature was "considered folk literature improper for university instruction" (34), and "cultured persons in the eighteenth century read and wrote in *Latin*. In their grammar schools, they had learned grammar and had written extensively—in Latin. [. . .] In many schools, all discussion was in Latin. […] *Literacy* was defined as the ability to read and write Latin" (35, emphasis added). The vast majority, then, of people who spoke English, did not have the required skills to read or write it. English was, for many years, primarily a spoken language and therefore English phonology has a significant effect upon the conventions of written English such as spelling and word selection.

Phonology

Phonology is actually the only aspect of language unique to spoken language. The primary definition of *phonology* as found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) is "the science of speech sounds and pronunciation, especially as they occur in a particular language" ("Phonology"). The pronunciation of some English words has a psychological effect on the way we spell words or even which words we choose to write. For example, *there*, *their*, and *they're* are often confused in written English because they are pronounced the same—and sound the same to our ears. When I use my voice recognition

software,[3] I find that the software often confuses words that sound alike. Consider the following sentence: "*There* are fifty books on *their* reading list that *they're* expected to read this year." I tried, several times, to convince the software to type this sentence correctly—but I was unsuccessful. The voice recognition software also frequently confuses similar-sounding words such as *accept* and *except*; in fact, it did exactly that, while typing *this* sentence.

Scholars apparently do not agree on the importance of pronunciation in dialect identification. Thomas J. Farrell, in his definition of Standard English, states that he "emphatically does not mean phonology" (166). Randolph Quirk states that "Standard English refers to the written language and not the spoken" (qtd. in Davies 172). However, Garland Bills, in his explanation of Chicano English, describes the confusion between the *ch* sound and the *sh* sound as an important feature of the dialect (qtd. in Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia 34). Geneva Smitherman, as well, cites phonetic phenomena such as the absence of the *r* sound in West African languages, and its effect on the English spoken by black Americans of West African heritage many generations later, as a significant feature of Black English ("Talkin" 7).

There has been significant research regarding phonological differences in regional dialects of spoken English. For example, Wendy Baker, David Eddington, and Lyndsey Nay of Brigham Young University did a study in which they considered phonological phenomena in English spoken in the state of Utah. In this study, they found that

> region of origin and amount of experience are significant factors in dialect
> identification. [They also discovered] that listeners from the region
> examined are best able to identify speech samples of that variety and those

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[3] *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*, Version 10

of other similar varieties, in contrast to those from distant areas. This is

true even though the listeners may not have been explicitly taught these

differences. […] [Specifically], the more similar the listener's dialect is to

Utah English, the better his or her ability to identify Utah speakers."

(67, 48)

Another study, "The Vowel Phonology of Urban Southeastern Wisconsin" by

Thomas C. Purnell, "explores whether or not vowel space restructuring in the

predominant local vernacular of southeastern Wisconsin is also found in the vowel space

of African Americans [by comparing] the vowel spaces of African Americans with those

of whites of the same background" (191). Purnell states that his study "provides new

insights into the complexity of personal identity revealed in verbal behavior" (191).

Barbara Z. Pearson and her associates, in their study "Phonological Milestones for

African American English-Speaking Children Learning Mainstream American English as

a Second Dialect," examine "African American children [who] come to school speaking

African American English as their primary dialect" and their assimilation into school

systems "where most of their education will be in the medium of Mainstream American

English" (229). The focus of this study is on African American children who had not yet

learned to express language in a written form.

When Farrell, Quirk, and other scholars exclude phonology in the process of

dialect identification, it is because they are considering Standard English only as a

phenomenon of written English. If the same words in the same order are extant, regional

or ethnic variation of pronunciation will not affect the integrity of written Standard

English. However, when considering Standard English in a broader sense, by including written *and* spoken English, phonology is indeed crucial in such identification.

<center>Spoken and Written English</center>

I frequently allude to my use of voice recognition software in the text of this thesis. I use *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*, Version 10, to transcribe spoken language into written form because of the lack of motor skills in my hands caused by Parkinson's Disease—which makes typing extremely difficult. Ironically, I have been using this software to transcribe spoken English into written English while I am writing about the relationship between spoken and written English. I have become painfully aware of the limitations of the software while attempting to dictate words that are phonetically similar to other words. I must carefully proofread any text transcribed with this software because it frequently makes errors in the speech recognition process when interpreting similar-sounding words. The software also occasionally picks up extraneous noise in the room, such as coughing, throat clearing, a cat meowing, or even a creaking chair—and renders it as words.

The following is found in the built-in *User's Guide* of the software: "Dragon uses [utilities of the software] to best guess what exactly it should transcribe; this is particularly important for sounds that can be spelled in different ways, like 'to' and 'too.' If you speak single words, or only a few words at a time, the software has few or no contextual clues." If working at peak efficiency, the software allegedly has the ability to discern the difference between similar-sounding words based on the context of the sentence. In my experience, sometimes this works and sometimes it does not. I have also found that the software has little difficulty transcribing "big" words such as *Shostakovich*

or *perambulator*, but frequently confuses simpler words such as *of* and *have*, *had* and *has*, *or* and *are*, and *and* and *in*. I have discovered, while working on this thesis, that the software also has difficulty distinguishing between *since* and *sentence*.

Perhaps the software would work perfectly if the speaker were speaking with absolutely perfect pronunciation. I have difficulty speaking clearly because of my Parkinson's Disease; but even if my disability were not a factor, my Texas accent and other factors render my pronunciation less than perfect. In a perfect world, the words *pen* and *pin* exhibit a subtle difference in pronunciation. However, as hard as I might try to pronounce them correctly, I cannot convince my voice recognition software to render either of these words into written English.

Written English is a graphic representation of spoken English. Even punctuation is aurally represented, to some degree, in spoken English because one of the purposes of punctuation is to contribute to the sense of temporal progression—by signifying pauses to the written flow of words. Generally, consonant and vowel sounds are represented by *letters* or combinations of letters, which form *syllables* which then form *words*. When a spoken word is represented accurately by its written counterpart, that word is said to be *phonetic*. Some languages, such as Spanish, reveal remarkably consistent equivalency between spoken words and their written counterparts. In English, however, sometimes these representations are consistent and sometimes they are not. For example, the word *gun* is a phonetic word—whereas the word *knife* is not. A student who is unfamiliar with the study of written English, a young native speaker or someone who is learning English as a second language, would probably spell *gun* correctly, but attempt to spell *knife* phonetically— resulting in an incorrect spelling such as *nif*.

<u>Grammar and Usage</u>

I discovered that accurately defining the word *grammar* is more difficult than I had anticipated. The *OED* offers a detailed definition of several facets of the concept of grammar, which includes the following:

> [The] department of the study of a language which deals with its inflexional forms or other means of indicating the relations of words in the sentence, and with the rules for employing these in accordance with established usage. […] An individual's manner of using grammatical forms; speech or writing judged as good or bad according as it conforms to or violates grammatical rules; also speech or writing that is correct according to those rules. ("Grammar")

In *The Uses of Grammar*, Rodby and Winterowd state the following:

> Grammar describes a language in use. Grammars are made of *constitutive rules*, that constitute the language and *prescriptive rules*, that attempt to regulate the language. […] Knowing grammar may help you to use English effectively. Grammar helps you to understand how language forms are used and why people think some language forms are right and others wrong. (1, emphasis added)

In the introduction to "Chapter 32: Grammar Basics" of *The Penguin Handbook*, Lester Faigley states the following:

> Many people feel uncomfortable when they hear the word *grammar*. They think of grammar as a set of mysterious rules that they are constantly in danger of violating. In fact, people know intuitively the grammar of their

> native language or else they couldn't speak it. What they often don't know
> is how grammar works. Just as you can drive a car without knowing much
> about an engine, you can also write without knowing much about the
> concepts of grammar. But if you know a little about how your car works,
> you can keep it running better and longer. Similarly, if you understand a
> few concepts of grammar, you can be more confident about many aspects
> of writing. (580)

In Chapters 32-37, Faigley covers such topics as are typically found in most college writing handbooks: sentences, sentence patterns, word classes, clauses, phrases, sentence types, fragments, run-ons, comma splices, subject-verb agreement, and modifiers—all under the broad umbrella of grammar (579-684).

In "Grammar and Usage," James D. Williams has a different view regarding grammar, stating that

> most people confuse *grammar* with *usage* and the *conventions that govern*
> *academic writing*. This confusion has several causes. The most significant,
> obviously, is ignorance. […] Matters are made quite hopeless […] by the
> fact that most authors of handbooks have little if any training in
> linguistics. Consequently, the grammar that these handbooks teach is a
> few hundred years old and has about as much to do with how people
> actually teach language and writing as does a book on Sanskrit. (318,
> emphasis added)

Williams further states that many English teachers lack "an understanding of what *grammatical* actually means" (321). Williams explains that

a sentence is grammatical when native speakers of a language accept a given utterance or written statement as meaningful. In English, grammaticality is also linked very closely to word order—in fact, to a specific word order that follows the pattern of subject-verb-object, or SVO. An ungrammatical sentence would be one that does not follow the SVO word order. […] It is important to note that a native speaker of English will never and can never spontaneously produce [ungrammatical] sentences. […] In fact, native speakers have a difficult time producing truly ungrammatical sentences. (321)

I do not agree with Williams' statement that "a native speaker of English will never and can never" generate sentences that are devoid of meaning because they fail to follow the SVO word order. I have heard utterances and read writing that was astonishingly incoherent and seemed to be a random flow of words with no discernible pattern.

However, I do agree that virtually all native speakers of English who are of average intelligence, who do not suffer from neurological impairments, and who grew up in an environment populated with similar "normal" people would intuitively follow some form of SVO word order in the sentences they speak or write. Williams does not make a distinction between *good* grammar and *bad* grammar—only whether or not a sentence is grammatical. He offers the following sentence as an example: "I ain't got no money"— stating that "[this] sentence structure follows the standard SVO pattern […]. Every native speaker of English understands the intended meaning of the sentence […]. It therefore meets all the requirements of a grammatical sentence and indeed is grammatical" (322).

However, Williams further states the following:

> We would not want students to produce such a sentence in a typical writing assignment. Such sentences are unacceptable because they violate the *usage* conventions that govern academic writing, *not because they are ungrammatical*. They are the equivalent of wearing cutoff jeans, a tank top, and sandals to an elegant wedding service—simply unacceptable. (322, emphasis added)

The main point that Williams is making is that the term *grammar* is frequently misused, and is appropriate only when describing the relative coherence of a sentence due to the presence or absence of the SVO pattern. Most of the errors inappropriately attributed to grammar are, in fact, errors of "usage conventions that govern academic writing" (318). I agree with Williams' clarification of the correct use of the term *grammar*; however, it is apparent that many teachers and textbooks will continue to use the term to describe both grammar, and *usage* conventions associated with Standard English. I, for one, will not use the term in a context that I know to be incorrect.

I disagree, however, with Williams' failure to distinguish between *good* grammar and *bad* grammar—taking into consideration only whether or not a sentence is grammatical. If indeed grammaticality is defined by the presence or absence of the SVO pattern, as Williams suggests, then the subject and verb must be in *agreement*, according to the conventions of Standard English, for the sentence to be *grammatically correct*. Faigley offers a simple explanation regarding subject-verb agreement: "A verb must match its subject. If a subject is singular […], the verb must take a singular form. If the subject is plural […], the verb must take a plural form. Therefore, verbs are said to *agree*

in number with their subjects. The single rule determines subject-verb agreement" (615).

However, Faigley does not consider *person* into his explanation of subject-verb

agreement. Even if the subject is singular, first person—*I*, and third person—*he/she/it* is

conjugated differently for virtually all English verbs. Subjects and verbs, then, must agree

in *person* and *number*.

When I studied Spanish, as an undergraduate, I found *verb conjugation* to be quite

challenging, because each combination of *person* and *number* of regular verbs has a

different suffix. Consider, for example, the present-tense conjugation of the verb

caminar:

	Singular	Plural	
First Person:	yo *camino*	nosostros/ -as	*caminamos*
Second Person:	tú *caminas*	vosostros/ -as	*camináis*
Third Person:	él/ella/usted *camina*	ellos/ellas/ustedes	*caminan*

("Spanish Verb Conjugator")

In English, the equivalent present tense conjugation of the verb *to walk* is remarkably

simpler:

	Singular:	Plural:
First Person:	I *walk*	we *walk*
Second Person:	you *walk*	you *walk*
Third Person:	he/she/it *walks*	they *walk*

Verb conjugation is actually one of the only things about English that is less complicated

than most other languages. Even as simple as this is, some people still manage to get it

wrong. In colloquial usage, we often hear statements such as "I walks to my girlfriend house," or "he walk like a monkey."

Although most verb conjugations in English are relatively simple, some conjugations do not follow the expected pattern—these are known as *irregular* verbs. Consider the following present tense conjugation of the verb *to be*:

	Singular:	Plural:
First Person:	I *am*	we *are*
Second Person:	you *are*	you *are*
Third Person:	he/she/it *is*	they *are*

Irregular verbs often cause confusion—especially when using the *past tense.* Most verbs are conjugated in the past tense by simply adding *-ed* to the present-tense form of the verb—*walk* becomes *walked*. There are, however, notable exceptions to this conversion; for example, *sing*, *speak*, and *see* become *sang*, *spoke*, and *saw*—not *singed*, *speaked*, and *seed*. In some irregular verbs, the past-tense version is the same as the present tense; a good example is the verb *to hurt*. It would be inappropriate to say something like "I hurted my leg when I fell yesterday."

Diction

According to the *OED*, the term *diction* least two general meanings**:** "choice or selection of words and phrases" and "the style or manner of enunciation in speaking or singing." The reference to "enunciation in speaking or singing" in the latter definition suggests a purely phonological phenomenon which would only exist in human language which is spoken or sung. The former definition, "choice or selection of words and phrases," however, is applicable to both spoken and written language. The *OED* renders

these two seemingly unrelated definitions collectively as "the manner in which anything is *expressed* in spoken or written words" ("Diction," emphasis added). The concept of diction, then, encompasses the choice of words and how accurately they are presented to the audience. Both facets of diction contribute to dialect identification. If, for example, a car salesman from East Texas were to proclaim, on a television commercial: "Y'all come on over to Big Bob's Auto Barn on Highway 80 east of Longview across from the Country Town Shopping Center for the best deals in town." In this passage, the word choice alone would indicate an American rural dialect—particularly the use of clichés such as "y'all come on over" and "the best deals in town." However, if he were to pronounce "east of" as "easta," drop the final "g" from "shopping," making it sound like "shoppin," pronounce "center" as "sinner," and expand the diphthong of "deals" until it sounded like "DEE-awls"—it would further enhance the identification of an East Texas rural dialect. However, as I stated previously, if the same words in the same order are extant, regional or ethnic variation of pronunciation will not affect the integrity of written Standard English. A written document could be created by a writer from Austin, or from Boston, and demonstrate no discernible difference—even though these writers *spoke* the language quite differently.

In "Deciding on Diction," Arthur Plotnik states that "nothing so quickly defines a person as the words [he or she chooses] from all the levels and shades that a language offers" (17). Plotnik further states the following:

> For the bulk of their expression, members of a society draw on a common lexicon. In this shared vocabulary are thousands of workaday words, along with the most popular words from much-heard dictions such as teenage,

corporate, religious and rural. The type of words individuals habitually

choose from outside the common group tilts them toward a particular

diction: "I want you to chill." "I want you to exercise stress control." "I

want you to still the anguish that lies upon your soul." […] Key choices

can be tracked along any number of spectrums, including vulgar to

eloquent and concise to verbose. We may hear of good and bad diction,

correct and incorrect, but such judgments tend to be elitist. Right vs.

wrong diction has to do only with purpose. (17)

In "Renewal of Core English Vocabulary," Miguel Márquez offers the following:

There is some consensus with regard to the existence of at least two layers

of vocabulary, one that comprises words of a wide general use and another

one that contains peripheral vocabulary. The number of words of general

use would be more limited in number, and those which are more

peripheral are far more numerous. […] Theoretically there is no clear-cut

boundary between both types. However, research [reveals] important

differences between them when attention is paid to use. (699)

Note that by acknowledging "the existence of *at least two* layers of vocabulary,"

Márquez does not exclude the possibility of *more than two* layers of vocabulary. Indeed,

many of us actively use many layers. I know this to be true in my own life experience.

My spoken diction changes as my environment changes; the words I speak, and even the

way I pronounce those words, adapts to different facets of my life such as graduate

school, church, interactions with friends and family, and the personal interactions

between me and my wife. I notice a remarkable change of diction when a group of

graduate students in a seminar class, who are conversing on a formal academic level, go outside for a "smoke break"—as the cigarettes and lighters come out, so do the "f-bombs." This phenomenon is known to linguists as *code shifting*.

My writing, however, is much more consistent. In virtually every situation, such as writing papers for graduate classes, emails to personal friends, or posts on *Facebook*, I still generally follow the conventions of written Standard English. I admit that because I am known to be a graduate student in an English department, I feel that I have an obligation to set a good example. I may, however, relax the mood of my writing, such as the use of contractions and figures of speech. Subtle changes of diction that still follow the conventions of written Standard English are a matter of style.

<u>Style</u>

Style is a subjective concept. Two or more individuals may speak or write English with equal correctness, according to all the conventions of Standard English, yet their use of the language is markedly different. Even in serious academic writing, produced by two equally brilliant scholars, one can be very interesting and pleasant to read, and the other can be as dull as dirt.

In the opening remarks of "Chapter 5: An Approach to Style" of *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, we find the following commentary about the subjective nature of style, which transcends objective rules or conventions:

> Up to this point, the book has been concerned with what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English. In this final chapter, we approach style in its broader meaning: style in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing. Here we leave solid ground. Who can confidently say what

ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the

mind? Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the

listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent?

These are high mysteries, and this chapter is a mystery story, thinly

disguised. There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide

to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able

to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which

writers may shape their course. (66)

Although style in writing is difficult to quantify, there are a few techniques that

may have an effect on it. For example, some writing instructors deem contractions, and

figures of speech such as clichés, inappropriate for formal academic writing. On the other

hand, some teachers don't really care if their students stray from the fold on such matters.

Many of the conventions of writing that were once hard and fast rules now fall into the

purview of style, such as ending a sentence with a preposition or splitting an infinitive.

Strunk and White comment on the importance of the *ear* when choosing which words to

use—both the *literal ear* and the *mental ear*—because even though one may be *writing*,

the *sounds* of the flow of words, if read aloud or even if *read mentally*, is still significant

(77-78). Hence, with respect to *my* sensibilities, the end of a sentence is where a

preposition should never be at. The important thing to remember is that style should be an

intellectual muscle that is flexed within the scope of Standard English conventions, and

not be used as an excuse for nonstandard writing—if you be gettin what I be sayin.

In "Plain English: What Counts besides Readability," Peter Crow argues that in

the business world, "a genuine belief in honest, responsive communication […] needs to

be central to a company's values and culture, [and] efforts to improve corporate communication actually may deepen or gloss over problems if instruction dwells exclusively on the stylistic elements of plain English" (87). Crow maintains that the communication of accurate information is crucial in written business texts even if readability is sacrificed. However, Crow nonetheless acknowledges the importance of readability of English texts in the business world:

> Few experiences are as refreshing as finding a contract we can read. Or reading a report that jerks us out of a stupor instead of nudging us into one. Thanks partly to a trend toward more readable English, business communication holds greater promise than ever of actually reaching people rather than adding to their confusion or putting them to sleep. Words we meet on the street or at the supermarket threaten us less than words which creep only occasionally out of a dictionary. Sentences whose subjects openly lay claim to clear actions seem somehow more forthright than passive constructions or clauses strung along by linking verbs. A plain style seems to speak to us near the center of who we are. (87)

Incidentally, with all due respect to Crow, the second "sentence" in this direct quotation: "Or reading a report that jerks us out of a stupor instead of nudging us into one" is a *sentence fragment*. The acceptance of sentence fragments is becoming increasingly common, even in academic writing. Like end-of-sentence prepositions and split infinitives, sentence fragments are now considered, by many, not to be an indissoluble usage rule—but a matter of style. Crow cites the use of less complex diction and sentences that use effective grammar and usage conventions in his description of

"plain style" or "readability"—indicating that the intention of the writer is more effectively communicated to the reader (87, 89).

In another study, "The Relationship between Writing Style and Leadership Style," Larry Smeltzer makes the following statement:

> Several studies have indicated that written communication is not only important for the supervisor to be effective on the job, but it is growing in importance. Leadership style refers to the characteristic way in which a supervisor relates to a subordinate; consequently, as the importance of writing increases, the impact it has on supervisory leadership style increases. (23)

Smeltzer's premise is that the style in which a supervisor writes interoffice communication such as emails has a direct effect on the way he or she is perceived by subordinate employees (23-24). In other words, if such written communication is presented with a formal tone or style, employees will be more likely to regard the supervisor as an authority figure. If, on the other hand, written communications are less formal and are presented as "friendly" notes passed between equals, employees will see the supervisor more as a peer that as an authority figure. The conclusion of Smeltzer's study was that how the supervisor is perceived by his employees based on the supervisor's writing style is not always an accurate indicator of the supervisor's true personality or ability as a leader (30). Several years ago, while working for the state of Texas, I had a supervisor who would frequently use nonstandard English in interoffice emails; when he used words such as "theyselves," it diminished my respect for him, and the image that I had of his professional ability as a supervisor was also compromised.

According to Smeltzer, my former supervisor may have been an exceptional individual who was eminently qualified to be an effective leader, despite my perception of him.

<p style="text-align:center">Written English</p>

In its written form, English has distinctive rules for attaining accuracy that are unique to writing. If heard read aloud, a passage may seem to be correct, but if evaluated by the conventions of writing, could reveal errors—primarily the rules of sentence construction which are governed by capitalization and punctuation. Common errors include *run-on sentences*, *comma spices*, and *sentence fragments*. Also included in the sphere of written-only errors are *misspelled words* and the use of *wrong words* with similar or even identical pronunciation. The often-heard declaration of student writers "I write the way I talk," is not valid since even correctly-rendered speech could be written incorrectly.

Capitalization

The question of whether or not a given word is capitalized in Standard English is reasonably objective, according to a well-established set of rules. Most, if not all, of these conventions are explained in the first four and one-half pages of "Chapter 46: Capitalization and Italics" of *The Penguin Handbook*. These conventions include the requirement of capitalization of the first word of the sentence, proper names, titles preceding names, religions, languages, months, days of the week, titles of publications, and others (Faigley 774-78). Also included in this section are examples of instances where words are *not* capitalized, such as with seasons, or academic disciplines, unless they are part of a name (775). An important capitalization convention conspicuously absent from this list is the personal pronoun *I*, which is *always* capitalized. There are

conventions within specific academic disciplines that require capitalization; for example, in Judeo-Christian theology scholarship, not only names are the names of deity such as *God, Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, Immanuel,* and *Jesus*, and titles of deity such as *Christ, Messiah*, *Redeemer*, *Lamb of God*, and *I Am* capitalized, but so are words such as *father* and *son*, and pronouns such as *he*, *him*, and *his* when they refer to God.

Punctuation

The primary function of *punctuation* is to facilitate the mechanical construction of sentences. For example, *periods*, *exclamation points*, and *question marks* serve to signal the end of a sentence. *Commas* serve a variety of mechanical functions within sentences such as separating main clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions (Faigley 689), marking off parenthetical expressions (696), or separating items in a series (699). Punctuation marks such as *semicolons*, *colons*, *hyphens*, *quotation marks*, *parentheses*, and *dashes* serve specific functions in sentence construction as well (709-25).

While giving structure to sentences, punctuation also provides a sense of rhythm to the flow of words in written language. *Prosody*, the aesthetic perception of the sound of a flow of words in poetry and prose, is phenomena associated with spoken language; punctuation gives the reader clues to the writer's intention while reading the text aloud. Even if the text is *not* read aloud, it will still be "heard" in the reader's mind while reading silently, and punctuation is crucial to the reader's sense of temporal progression by indicating subtle pauses in the flow of words, and functions in a manner similar to *rhythmic rest notation* in written music:
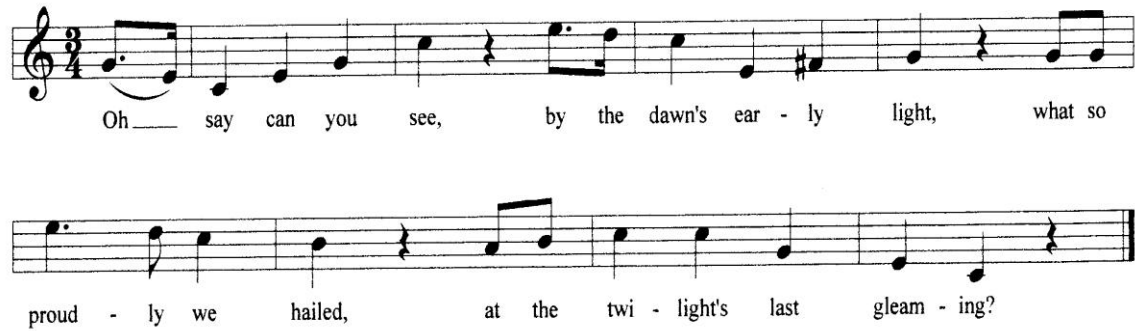
(Key and Smith)

The editors of *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* state that "much has been said about Yeats' carelessness and lack of knowledge in punctuation [. . .]" (Allt and Alspach xv). Yeats himself states, "I write so completely for the ear that I feel helpless when I have to measure pauses by stops and commas" (xv). However, Yeats' widow reported that Yeats "had become very irate several times with a publisher who had taken it upon himself to change the poet's punctuation" (xv).

In *Purposeful Punctuation*, Dick Heaberlin states the following:

> I am not a purist about punctuation, but as an editor and writer I see many good reasons for knowing and using conventional punctuation. It is, first of all, an aid in clarity, showing proper relationship between the structures of our sentences, letting the reader know when one phrase, clause, or sentence ends and another begins.
>
> Conventional punctuation is also a part of a long history of bookmaking, of typesetting, of the appearance of the work on the page. Some of the ways we punctuate seem counterintuitive. For example, why do commas always go inside quotation marks? They do because early typesetters liked the way it looked. Whatever the reason for the

conventions we have, we have them. We have a social compact to be

conventional when we are best served by doing so. (5)

Punctuation, then, serves at least three functions: to facilitate the mechanical

construction of sentences; to provide a sense of rhythm, or temporal progression, to the

flow of words in written language, even if only "heard" mentally while reading; and to

bring order to the "appearance of the work on the page" (Heaberlin 5). Consider the

preceding sentence without punctuation:

> Punctuation then serves at least three functions to facilitate the mechanical
>
> construction of sentences to provide a sense of rhythm or temporal
>
> progression to the flow of words in written language even if only heard
>
> mentally while reading and to bring order to the appearance of the work
>
> on the page

There is no definition of sentence structure; there is no sense of temporal progression

because the words flow in a steady stream without pauses of any kind, and the written

text is difficult to follow with the eyes, making reading more difficult.

Spelling

As I discussed in Chapter I of this thesis, many different languages merged to

create English—which was, in its inception, a Germanic language. In 1066, the Norman

invasion resulted in the infusion of French, a Romance language. The amalgamation of

divergent phonetic systems resulted in an extremely convoluted system of orthography.

Baugh and Cable state the following about "the problem of orthography":

> The trouble was not merely that English spelling was bad, for it is still bad
>
> today, but that there was no generally accepted system that everyone could

conform to. In short, it was neither phonetic nor fixed. Speaking generally, the spelling of the modern languages in the Middle Ages had attempted with fair success to represent the pronunciation of words, and this is true of English in spite of the fact that Norman scribes introduced considerable confusion when they tried to write a language that they imperfectly knew and carried over habits they had formed in writing French. (208)

The most important thing to remember about English spelling is that words are not always spelled phonetically. Baugh and Cable consider this a major *liability* of the English language when studied by non-native speakers:

A […] serious criticism of English by those attempting to master it is the chaotic character of its spelling and the frequent lack of correlation between spelling and pronunciation. Writing is merely a mechanical means of recording speech. And theoretically the most adequate system of spelling is that which best combines simplicity with consistency. In alphabetic writing an ideal system would be one in which the same sound was regularly represented by the same character and a given character always represented the same sound. None of the European languages fully attains this high ideal, although many of them, such as Italian or German, come far nearer to it than English. […] English-speaking children undoubtedly waste much valuable time during the early years of their education in learning to spell their own language, and to the foreigner our spelling is appallingly difficult. (14-15)

Likewise, in "Spelling Pronunciation and Visual Preview both Facilitate Learning to

Spell Irregular Words," Maartie Hite and Pieter Reitsma make the following statement:

> The main issue in spelling is that one must know how to translate spoken
>
> language into written language. Generally, less skilled spellers attempt to
>
> translate every phoneme into a corresponding grapheme because their
>
> orthographic memory for letter patterns and sequences is weak. However,
>
> phonemes cannot always be matched directly to a sequence of
>
> corresponding graphemes, especially in English […] irregular words.
>
> (301)

The main point that Hite and Reitsma are making is that despite well-meaning attempts to

make it so, English is *not* an entirely phonetic language. Because *some* words in English

are phonetic, "less skilled spellers" struggle to apply phonetic conventions to the entire

language, which results in many misspelled words.

In *The Art of Spelling: The Madness and the Method*, Marilyn vos Savant offers

an explanation for these inconsistencies:

> English spelling is unique in that it bears the marks of the near-countless
>
> standards that have converged to form it, making it the most culturally rich
>
> language in the world, the most diverse palette for literary exploration, and
>
> the biggest challenge to lexicographers—and spellers. […] [A]lthough
>
> English orthography is an alphabetic system, it is not an ideal one. […] If
>
> it were ideal, phonetically speaking, there would be one letter to represent
>
> each sound; instead, there are forty-four elementary sounds, called
>
> *phonemes*, in the English language, with only twenty-six letters to

represent them, so each letter [or] […] different combinations of letters [*graphemes*], can represent any of several different sounds depending on the context. And the evolution of the English language has complicated the rules of this representation, merging words and word forms from other languages so that the current orthography is a mixture of standards: some spellings are phonetically based, others are dictated by nonphonetic rules, and still others are aberrations that nevertheless become accepted by virtue of their inclusion in dictionaries over the years. (24, 47, emphasis added)

English is replete with inconsistencies associated with orthography. For example, the *sh* sound is represented phonetically in words such as *shine*, but also appears non-phonetically in words such as *sugar*, *emotion*, *charade*, *social*, and *fissure* (Wolman 3). Based on their spelling, the words *rough*, *dough*, *bough*, and *through* would appear to be rhyming words; however, the vowel sound in each of these words is different (3). I have also observed other inconsistencies. When spoken, the second syllable of the words *balance* and *cadence* sound very similar, but are spelled differently. Likewise, the word *available*, means "able to be of service" and the word *audible* means "able to hear"—yet the suffixes of these words are spelled differently.

In an attempt to navigate the storms of confusion created by English spellings, some "spelling rules" have evolved. I am sure virtually every student of the English language has, at some time in their lives, been made aware of some version of the following: "Write *i* before *e*/ Except after *c*/ Or when sounded like *a*/ As in *weigh*, or *sleigh*." However, very few of these students have been made aware of the rest of this innocuous little poem: "And except *seize* and *seizure*/ And also *leisure*/ *Weird*, *height*,

and *either*/ *Forfeit* and *neither*" (vos Savant 129-30). Any such "spelling rules" are inevitably accompanied by protracted lists of exceptions. The bitter truth, that students might as well accept, is that the only way to learn how to spell most English words is simply to memorize the spellings—without guidance from the words' pronunciation or ill-conceived spelling rules.

Homographs, Homonyms, and Homophones

One of the weaknesses of electronic spellcheckers, such as is found in word processing programs, is that if you misspell a word and the result is *another* legitimate word, the spellchecker will not identify it as a misspelled word. In English, there are many ambiguous words are quite confusing because of their similarity. *Webster's Universal Spelling, Grammar and Usage* describes three types of words that are often confused because of their similarity.

A *homograph* is a "word that is spelled the same as another word but has a different meaning and pronunciation" (313). *Webster's* gives several examples, such as *bow*, which if pronounced to rhyme with *low*, is a noun meaning a looped knot such as in a ribbon—or, if pronounced to rhyme with *how*, is a verb meaning "to bend the head or body as a sign of respect or in greeting" (313). Another similar homograph is *sow*; when pronounced to rhyme with *low*, it is a verb meaning "to scatter seeds in the earth," but when pronounced to rhyme with *how*, it is "a female pig" (313). A homograph that I have encountered, not listed in *Webster's*, is *bass*; when pronounced to rhyme with *case*, it is a musical instrument or human voice that plays or sings the low notes; when pronounced to rhyme with *mass*, it is a fish.

A *homonym* is "a word that has the same spelling and the same pronunciation as another word but has a different meaning" (*Webster's* 313). A good example of a homonym is *fair*, which has several meanings: "light in color," "equitable or free from prejudice," "average or moderate," or "a market held regularly in the same place." Another example is *row*, which could be a verb meaning "to propel the boat by means of oars," or a noun meaning "a number of people or things arranged in a line" (314). Likewise, *mass* could be a property of physics or a liturgical religious ceremony.

The meaning of homographs and homonyms must be discerned by careful examination of the context in which they appear, and are phenomena associated with *reading*, since the spelling of the words is the same. *Homophones*, however, often create confusion associated with *writing*. A homophone is "a word that is pronounced in the same way as another but is spelled in a different way and has a different meaning" (*Webster's* 314). A set of three homophones commonly confused by writers and that I discussed earlier in this chapter, are *there*, *their*, and *they're*. If someone were to write the following: "They have lived in *there* house on Elm Street for many years"—the sentence would sound correct if read aloud. However, in its written form, it is incorrect—because *there* is the *wrong word*—the correct word is the possessive pronoun *their*. A Bible study I recently read asked the question: "Why did Saul *fain* repentance?"—the correct word, in this case, is *feign*—"to pretend, fake, or deceive" ("Feign"). *Fain* is an obsolete word meaning "gladness or joy" ("Fain"). In a literature paper I wrote a few years ago, I made a comment that a line in a poem I was analyzing "peaked my curiosity." My professor circled the word *peaked* and wrote the comment "wrong word." Since the word I should have used is *piqued*, I made a *wrong word error*. It is important to note that such an error

is *not* a spelling error—it is the wrong word—just as wrong as using *went* when *gone* is the appropriate word. Some common homophones include *to/too/two*, *sight/site/cite*, *right/rite/write*, *cereal/serial*, *bore/boar*, *feat/feet*, *eye/I*, *would/wood*, *role/roll*, *patients/patience*, and *none/nun*. Sometimes words are not pronounced exactly the same, but are similar and therefore frequently confused. This confusion is compounded by the use of nonstandard spoken accents. Although I am frequently in denial, in actuality, I have a Texas accent. Therefore, my pronunciation renders some words more similar than is appropriate—such as *pin/pen*, *win/when*, *center/sinner*, *affect/effect*, *compliment/complement*, *consul/council*, and *accept/except*. Due to the nature of this chapter section, my voice recognition software was pushed to its limits and was frequently confused by some of the words I dictated—which made the transcription process especially challenging.

In Chapter IV, the next chapter, I discuss degrading influences on the integrity of the English language, in particular, those affected by popular culture, such as nonstandard dialects, hip-hop and user-generated internet sites.

CHAPTER IV

DESTRUCTIVE INFLUENCES ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

While discussing destructive influences on the English language in this chapter, I am operating under the premise that speakers of English internalize good or bad habits initiated by models in their environment. When we repeatedly hear or read patterns of grammar or usage, whether correct or not according to the conventions of Standard English, we tend to reproduce those patterns. The more we are exposed to these models, the greater the effect. In the study of human psychology, this concept is known as *Behavioral Learning Theory*, "a school of thought […] based on the assumption that learning occurs through interactions with the environment" (Cherry). For example, if we repeatedly hear a line in a popular song that uses incorrect grammar or usage, we are more likely to use the incorrect version in our own speech and writing.

I consider the conventions of Standard English, particularly written English, such as grammar and usage, to be extremely important. However, *content* is also extremely important; for example, forming sound rhetorical arguments is a vital element in academic writing. An essential issue in determining whether or not written English is appropriate for a given context is the writer's word choice, or diction. One of the specific issues of diction is the use of *profanity* or *obscenity*. According to the *OED*, something is *profane* when it "desecrates what is holy or sacred" ("Profane"). A good example of

profanity, at least according to the Judeo-Christian perspective, is the use of the "Lord's name in vain," which is one of the *Ten Commandments*: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain." (Exodus 20:7, KJV). This can be manifested in a variety of ways in English—the most common probably being *goddamn*. I do not find it relevant whether or not a speaker or writer of English believes that a particular religion is true or not—if the adherents of a given religion are offended by the speaking or writing of any particular words or phrases—I consider it impolite for *anyone* to use such words. Although I am theologically, philosophically, and politically divergent from believers in the Islam religion, it would nonetheless be inappropriate for me to use terms such as *towelhead* or *sand nigger* to describe Muslims.

The *OED* describes something as *obscene* when it is "offensively or grossly indecent or lewd"—or if found in writing, something that "tends to deprave and corrupt those who are likely to read, see, or hear the contents" ("Obscene"). In 1964, in the U.S. Supreme Court case Jacobellis v. Ohio, a case in which the state of Ohio was claiming a First Amendment right to ban the showing of a French film called *Les Amants* (The Lovers), which the state considered obscene, Associate Justice Potter Stewart made this subjective observation in his written statement: "I shall not today attempt […] to define [obscenity]—but I know it when I see it" ("U.S. Supreme Court").

I perceive a general definition of *obscenity* to be language containing words that refer to sexual or excrementary organs or functions in a frivolous or undignified manner, with the intention of humor. In 1972, American comedian George Carlin recorded a comedy skit entitled "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." The seven words

that Carlin designates are *shit*, *piss*, *fuck*, *cunt*, *cocksucker*, *motherfucker*, and *tits* (Carlin). Although not a comprehensive list, the words Carlin named are indeed forbidden to be spoken on American broadcast media—although they are now common on *cable TV*. Carlin's words also comply with *my* definition of words that describe "sexual or excrementary organs or functions."

In "An Obscenity Symbol," Allen Walker Read qualifies what he considers the reasonable parameters of obscenity:

> Is it possible for a word to be obscene by nature, in and of itself? We recall at once that no word has any meaning except what is brought to it by each speaker or hearer. Can it even be said that obscenity lies in the thing named? Surely no sensible person would maintain that sex in itself is obscene, for it can be a wholesome, ennobling force; and the excrementary functions are not obscene, for they are a normal part of living […]. The determinant of obscenity lies not in words or things, but in the attitudes that people have towards these words and things. To hazard a definition, we may say that obscenity is any reference to the bodily functions that gives to anyone a certain emotional reaction, that is of a "fearful thrill" in seeing, doing, or speaking the forbidden. Thus, it is the existence of a ban or taboo that creates the obscenity where none existed before. (252)

As Read suggests, the rhetorical context in which these words are used is important; however, I do not think that most medical professionals, when referring to sexual or excrementary functions, would use words such as *fuck* or *shit*—but would use more clinical terms such as *sexual intercourse* or *feces*. Incidentally, I do not consider the use

of a regional or ethnic dialect to be a justification for using words which are not considered polite for a universal audience. Frankly speaking, I do not care if *motherfucker* is a common word in African American Vernacular English, I do not want to hear it spoken, nor do I want to see it in any form of written English, because I find it personally offensive.

As I stated in Chapter I, one of the foremost concerns of English language scholars of past generations was the corruption of English by nonstandard regional dialects. James Beattie, who taught at Marischal College in Aberdeen, Scotland, in the eighteenth century, advised his students to "avoid the idioms of their own nation" because such "barbarous language debases the taste" and "taints the mind" (Miller 63). Thomas P. Miller, in "The Formation of College English," states that "the Scots who taught the language and literature of England were intensely aware that [the language] they studied was not a part of their heritage by birth but had to be consciously acquired by mastering the conventions of the dominant culture" (67). I maintain that the threat of contamination of Standard English is as real today as it was in Beattie's time. In fact, the threat is actually much more severe, because there are many more participants in the language communication process, there are more destructive factors at work—and the contemporary influences of mass media and popular culture are more powerful than they have ever been before.

I have drawn the conclusion, however, that *most* of the regional and ethnic dialects extant in English-speaking populations do not have as profound an effect on the integrity of written Standard English as I had previously supposed. Many speakers of these nonstandard dialects easily make the transition to the more formal conventions of

written English that is generally expected in academic environments and for writing intended to be read by the general public, such as newspapers, pamphlets, and advertisements. Many nonstandard dialects are identified as such primarily by phonological factors, and when rendered into written form, do not differ significantly from accepted varieties of Standard English. It is only when speakers of nonstandard dialects feel that their cultural identity is being threatened by conformance to the conventions of Standard English that there is a problem. In some cases, people from white rural subcultures who have an inherent mistrust of education associated with classes of society they perceive to be higher than their own may resist conforming to conventions of those "higher" societies—including the use of language. I have, from my own family, heard sentiments expressed, such as "You might think you are all high and mighty because of all that book learnin you been gettin at that highfalutin school of yours, but you ain't worth shit unless you got you some common ordinary horse sense— and you can't learn that at no school." Incidentally, I was quite shocked when my voice recognition software successfully transcribed *highfalutin* and I discovered, from the *Microsoft Word Thesaurus*, that it is actually a real word meaning *pretentious*.

Despite my personal experience, my research has shown that the only subgroup of the English-speaking world who has made a serious attempt at academic defense of its dialect and consider it a viable alternative to Standard English is a relatively small but extremely vocal group of African American scholars, which I discuss in Chapter II.

Is African American Vernacular English a threat to Standard English? Black Americans have spoken English differently than whites for over 400 years. Even if it is incorrect English, what harm is there in a minority ethnic group using "slang" to

communicate with each other? Why is this dialect a threat to Standard English now, if it was not in past generations?

African American Vernacular English is no longer just a phenomenon of the black community. It is no longer a dialect spoken only by a small segment of the general population. It has become a dominant part of "pop culture." Today, it is not uncommon to hear verbal expressions such as "my bad" or "I got your back, dog" from white or other non-African American teenagers and young adults. This is primarily a result of the influence of *hip-hop*. Today, hip-hop, or "rap music," is extremely popular all around the world. Hip-hop is more than just a contemporary genre of music; it has become a cultural icon for young adults, teenagers, and even children. Common themes include violence, disrespect for authority, breaking the law, subjugating and objectifying women, and sexual promiscuity. As if that is not bad enough, the language of hip-hop is far worse than ordinary Black English. Aside from the use of nonconventional grammar and usage, it is riddled with negativity and extreme obscenity.

Before I examine the effect of hip-hop on the English language, I need to make something clear—I am not objective regarding this subject—I do not like this genre of "music." The repetitive nature of the synthetic drum beat and the atonal droning of the spoken lyrics grate on my nerves—and I find the repetitive obscenity, particularly the use of the words *fuck* and *nigger* personally offensive. Most of all, I dislike the content and message of hip-hop which manifests disrespect and hatred for women, white people, police, and society in general. While doing this research, listening to the music and reading the lyrics, at times, made me feel physically ill. One of the things I find particularly offensive is the abuse done to the English language.

The language of hip-hop has spread, like a virus, not just to Black America, but also to young people of all races and ethnicities in the United States and across the world. What was once considered repugnant is now considered ordinary. Our young people frequently use the language of hip-hop in their daily lives, and when it becomes ingrained in their psyche, it adversely affects their sense of language—including their writing.

Consider the following by rapper *The Notorious B.I.G.*:

> I make your mouthpiece obese like Della Reese
>
> When I release, you loose teeth like Little Cease
>
> Nigga please
>
> Blood floods your dungarees
>
> And that's just a half of my warpath
>
> Laugh now cry later, I rhyme greater
>
> Than the average player hater [. . .]
>
> But that's on the low doe
>
> Be the cats with no dough
>
> Tried to play me at my show
>
> I pull out 44's, and go up in they clothes
>
> Short-change niggas
>
> Snort-cane niggas [. . .]
>
> Heard through the grapevine, you got fucked foe times
>
> Damn that three to nine, fucked you up for real doe
>
> Slink steal slow
>
> As you remorse we feel no (Notorious B.I.G.)

Incidentally, Notorious B.I.G., a.k.a. Christopher Wallace, like many other rappers, met a

violent end—he was shot to death in 1997 at the age of 24 (Cloud).

Consider the following work entitled "Fuck the Police" by N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit

Attitude), an American hip-hop group from Compton, California ("N.W.A."):

> Takin out a cop or two, they can't cope with me
>
> The motherfuckin villain that's mad
>
> With potential, to get bad as fuck
>
> So I'ma turn it around
>
> Put in my clip, yo, and this is the sound
>
> Boom! Boom! Yeah, somethin like that
>
> But it all depends on the size of the gat
>
> Takin out a police, would make my day
>
> But a nigga like Ren don't give a fuck to say
>
> "Fuck the police"! [repeated several times] (N.W.A., "Fuck")

When I read these lyrics, I thought that this was about as bad as it could get—until I read

the lyrics of another of the works of N.W.A. entitled "She Swallowed It":

> If you got a gang of niggaz, the bitch would let you rape her
>
> She likes suckin' on dicks, and lickin' up nutz
>
> And they even take de broomstick at the butt
>
> Just to say that she did it with a rapper
>
> But the pussy was more fishy than red snapper. (N.W.A., "She")

The excerpts from these rap "songs" exhibit profound aberrations of the English language—not only in their nonstandard use of grammar and diction, but in the content and message as well—which are also ingrained in the consciousness of their listeners.

Incidentally, the hip-hop artists and works I have cited in this chapter are not obscure samplings of the genre. The Notorious B.I.G. and N.W.A. were both extremely successful hip-hop acts in the 1990s, evidenced by record sales and *Billboard* chart positions ("N.W.A."; "Notorious"). Dr. Dre and Ice Cube, both former members of N.W.A., became platinum-selling solo artists in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century ("N.W.A.").

I am not suggesting that hip-hop is "bad" simply because it is a manifestation of African American culture—only that it exerts a negative influence on impressionable young people, including their sense of language, because of its predominance in contemporary popular culture. Although there are other genres of popular music that frequently contain dark and subversive imagery, such as *Heavy Metal*, none of them has the influential power of hip-hop—because they appeal to a relatively smaller audience by comparison.

Although not as universally popular as hip-hop, Heavy Metal is another music genre frequently known for its themes of antisocial behavior—including violence, murder, suicide, and even Satan worship. Heavy Metal, created and produced by white American and British musicians, is subdivided into several sub-genres such as death metal, goth metal, speed metal, and thrash metal ("Heavy"). While all Heavy Metal does not contain explicitly evil and destructive themes in its lyrics, there are notable examples

where dark imagery and antisocial content exist. Consider the following by *Dope*, an American metal band from Villa Park, Illinois ("Dope"):

> I don't need your forgiveness
>
> I don't need your hate
>
> I don't need your acceptance
>
> So what should I do?
>
> I don't need your resistance
>
> I don't need your prayers
>
> I don't need your religion
>
> I don't need a thing from you
>
> I don't do what I've been told
>
> You're so lame why don't you just go
>
> Die motherfucker die! [repeated 3 times] (Dope, "Die")

Even in mainstream pop music that does not feature themes of obscenity, violence, and aggression—the music that the average citizen enjoys, there are a few examples of "bad grammar"—which has the potential to affect more people because it is so popular. As I discussed in Chapter II, the British rock band Pink Floyd released a song entitled "Another Brick In The Wall" on the album *The Wall* in 1979 which featured the following lyrics: "We don't need no education/ We don't need no thought control/ No dark sarcasm in the classroom/ Teacher leave them kids alone" (Pink Floyd). In this particular case, it seems evident to me that Roger Waters and David Gilmour, who wrote this song, were exercising poetic license when they used bad grammar to marginalize the need for education; the diction of these lyrics was deliberate, and intended to make a

point. Likewise, I believe that the Rolling Stones deliberately and thoughtfully chose the lyrics "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" in their song by the same name—released in 1965 (Rolling Stones).

However, Michael Masser and Gerald Goffin, both of whom are Caucasian, wrote the song "Do You Know Where You're Going To" for Diana Ross, which includes the following lyrics:

> Do you know where you're going to?
>
> Do you like the things that life is showing you?
>
> Where are you going to?
>
> Do you know?
>
> Do you get what you're hoping for?
>
> When you look behind you there's no open door
>
> What are you hoping for?
>
> Do you know? (Ross, "Theme")

I have been unable to find documentation regarding the songwriters' placement of the prepositions *to* and *for* at the end of statements—but the fact that it occurs twice, two lines apart, using two different prepositions, indicates to me that it was probably not an accident. I suspect that the songwriters were aware of the prepositions, but exercised poetic license for prosodic purposes. Obviously, the song had a profound effect on listening audiences; it was No. 1 on *Billboard's Top 100* for 17 weeks in 1976 ("Top 100").

Another more recent example, from 1995, is the song "One of Us," by Joan Osborne, which lyrically asks the question: "What if God was one of us." This is a

hypothetical question and is in the subjunctive mood; therefore, the correct usage would be: "What if God *were* one of us" (Faigley 646). Since this song was extremely popular, having held the No. 4 position on *Billboard's Top 100* for 22 weeks in 1996 ("Top 100"), it no doubt affected the perception of how a hypothetical question should be rendered in the subjunctive mood.

There are other contemporary influences that threaten the integrity of the English language. In the eighteenth century, the educated minority who controlled academia, and the less-educated majority, could live peacefully on their respective sides of the linguistic fence. John Ward, for example, by stating that "the vulgar have their peculiar words and phrases, suited to their circumstances" (qtd. in Douglas 81), recognized that divergent lifestyles would result in divergent uses of the language. In the twenty-first century, however, we live in a world where mass communication, including print media, television, radio, and the Internet, influences millions of people. We have millions of voices screaming in our heads, and the messages conveyed, in both verbal and written form, use "good" English, "very bad" English, and everything in between. Virtually everyone now has the opportunity to say anything they wish to say, any way they want to say it—and the masses are listening and are being influenced.

There is, in our postmodern age, a threat to the literacy associated with Standard English, especially in its written form, that is more profound and dangerous than interference from alternate dialects or the corrupting influence of popular culture such as hip-hop. The technological phenomenon that has only been with us for less than twenty-five years—but has transformed the world—is something we call the *Internet*. There are many different types of Internet sites and utilities, such as government, educational, and

general information sites which are carefully monitored for content—including proper use of English and other languages. These professional Internet sites are usually "read-only" sites or are only marginally interactive. However, there are now countless Internet sites, known as *user-generated content sites*, which are created and edited by virtually anyone with access to a computer, and are interactive—involving communication or collaboration between users. User-generated content is content created and published by users online and comprised of videos, podcasts and posts on discussion groups, blogs, wikis, and social media sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. User-generated content allows for a "wider content provider base" and the "chance for all users to share their opinions online." Criticism of this type of content includes "credibility and quality issues" ("User").

There is a verbal expression that many, myself included, use in jest: "If it is on the Internet, then it must be true." Unfortunately, apparently many people actually consider the Internet a legitimate source of credible information—even if it is found on user-generated content sites. On December 19, 2011, an anonymous blogger posted a detailed written account, using Standard English, stating that Jon Bon Jovi, a rock star who was extremely popular during the 1980s and 90s, was found dead in his hotel room from an apparent heart attack. The news spread through the Internet like wildfire, and soon was the topic of conversation—the "word on the street." In less than 24 hours, the news of Bon Jovi's death was revealed to be an "Internet hoax," and he was, in fact, alive and well ("Jon Bon Jovi"). I read the original blog at the following website address: http://dailynewbloginternational.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/international-rockstar-legend-jon-bon-jovi-dead-at-49/. Unfortunately, I have only my memory as

documentation, because by the end of the day on December 20, 2011, the blog was removed, apparently by the website administrator, and all that can be found now at this website address is a "page not found" notice. In general, user-generated content websites are notoriously unreliable with regards to *any* information they convey, including the quality of the English language they use.

Because there is so much potential to exchange ideas on user-generated content sites, users feel compelled to speed up the process by shifting the written language into abbreviated code that uses fewer characters. The conventions of Standard English, as properly written, are time-consuming and difficult to produce quickly by typing, especially when two or more people are engaging in active conversation in chat rooms, instant messaging, and more recently—cell phone text messaging.

While using user-generated content Internet sites and cell phone text messaging, apparently, the first thing to go is the shift key; messages are often typed only in small case, including the personal pronoun *I*. Words such as *be*, *see*, *oh*, *are*, *you*, and *why* have been replaced with phonetically equivalent single letters *b*, *c*, *o*, *r*, *u*, and *y*. Likewise, the words *to*, *for*, and *ate* become *2*, *4*, and *8*. These single syllables are combined to create abbreviations for multi-syllable words or phrases—*before* becomes *b4* and *oh, I see* becomes *oic*. Even when words are spelled out, they are frequently misspelled— sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. Punctuation plus grammar and usage conventions are virtually ignored. There is a long list of abbreviations of short phrases like *roflmao* (rolling on floor laughing my ass off) and *plos* (parent looking over shoulder) ("Urban"). This "abbreviated" form of written language was not deliberately

engineered, but apparently evolved naturally among those who use these communication media—just as acronyms and other jargon develop in technical communication.

These user-generated content phenomena are a great danger to the integrity of written Standard English. Many Internet users, myself included, sometimes use this "Internet shorthand" when appropriate, but easily shift to Standard English for more formal writing tasks. However, many people who use this method of abbreviated code shifting in these media, especially children, teenagers, and young adults, have apparently abandoned the conventions of written English in their writing in general. Several of my fellow graduate students employed as English teachers in public secondary schools express grave concerns concerning the influence of the Internet on their students' writing skills. Some students find it acceptable to use this "abbreviated English" exclusively— even in writing assignments such as essays that they submit to their teachers. It appears as if this "quick and easy" method of writing English has become so ingrained in their cognitive methodology of writing that, in some cases, they cannot comprehend an alternative. This is probably because they spend so many hours engaging this process that it now seems commonplace.

I need to make it clear that the degraded version of written English found in user generated content Internet sites is more profound than simply a desire to write faster. Some of the abuses of the English language found in these sites are not the result of attempted brevity or the influence of nonstandard regional or ethnic dialects—it is the result of apathy and sheer stupidity that previously would have just faded into the background, but which now has an equal voice.

The following are actual posts from *Facebook*; however, the identities of these posters will remain anonymous. The initial post, written in reasonably Standard English, exhibits extremely faulty reasoning, if indeed he or she was being serious, which I suspect he or she was not: "A lot of deer get hit by cars west of Crown Point on U.S. 231. There are too many cars to have the deer crossing here. The deer crossing sign needs to be moved to a road with less traffic." The joke, obviously, is the supposition that deer can read the signs. The following is offered as a response to this post: "i seen this yesterday on someone elses and i thought OMG there is some really dumb ppl out there, never thought anyone could be that dumb tho!" Upon reading this, my first thought was that it was indeed ironic that this poster would consider someone else "dumb."

The following was posted on Facebook in response to a blogger's complaint that Starbucks and other retail franchises do not adequately support alternate lifestyles—specifically same-sex marriages:

> i understand what you are saying but who has the right to say they are
> wrong for it what they believe , and who says that they are right or wrong
> as who says you are right or wrong or for that fact who says that anyone is
> , it is simply ones belief is all it is and boils down too !!!! everyone has
> their opinion and thats what that is just an opinion so why get upset over .
> i cant stand starbucks but thats my opinion !!!! if people are are upset
> because of a belief and a opinion of what others think then they are
> commetting bigotry as well and this country then needs to wipe away all
> freedoms and let the government have total control over everything .. and
> people are stupid !!! and i agree most chrisitians hipocretes about things ! i

> was forced to attend church when i was young and it turned me away but i
>
> kept an open mind about and that is why i dont force religion on anyone if
>
> they want to be christians or dont want to be its their choice not mind to
>
> make for them , but thank God for me being here today after loosing my
>
> right leg and beating cancer when i was four and for meeting the people i
>
> have in life

I sense some genuine heartfelt emotion based on this person's life experience, but the text rambles incoherently, and he or she fails to communicate his or her message adequately because it is written so poorly.

I have identified several manifestations of contemporary society that have a negative effect on the integrity of the English language—such as nonstandard regional and ethnic dialects, popular culture such as hip-hop, and user-generated content Internet sites. In some cases, the unconventional grammar and usage extant in these phenomena exhibit discernible patterns, as is often found in nonstandard dialects, which Garland Bills identifies as "clear signs of temporal stability, structural consistency, and internal […] predictability" (qtd. in Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia 34). In other cases, there are no discernible patterns; order has been replaced with anarchy, and the conventions of written Standard English have been replaced with mindless stream-of-consciousness incoherent rambling—such as sometimes found in user-generated content Internet sites.

In this chapter, I identified what I consider several genuine threats to the integrity of Standard English: regional and ethnic English dialects, hip-hop music, and user-generated content internet sites. In Chapter V, the next and final chapter of this thesis project, I offer a brief summary of the basic tenets of my perspective regarding the

enrichment and degradation of the English language, and present the conclusions I have made from my research. Having elucidated the reality that modern English, both spoken and written, is indeed under attack, and having identified some of the destructive influences—I offer a solution in Chapter V about what can be done, if anything, to counter the onslaught perpetrated by those influences. I also offer an answer to the question I pose in the title of this project—"Does It Really Matter"?

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

I do not have a clear memory of the exact moment I decided to choose the subject of the degradation of the English language for my Master's thesis. I do know that I was advised by several of my professors that I should choose a subject about which I was passionate. Quite often, when people I meet "in the real world" ask me what I am studying in graduate school and I reply "English," they respond with a flippant comment such as "well then, I suppose I will have to watch my grammar around *you*." Apparently, English scholars are generally perceived as "grammar nerds" who are obsessed with finding errors in the speech and writing of others. In my case, I must confess that I am often guilty of this assessment. In my interactions with my fellow graduate students, and even with some of my professors, I have developed a reputation as a "grammar freak," and I have been told, more than once, that I needed to "get a life."

I look at the academic world from a unique perspective; I am what is known as a *nontraditional student*. I was fifty-five years old on February 11, 2012. Since I successfully defended this thesis on February 17, 2012, I will be awarded a *Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Composition* on May 12, 2012. I know that one of two things is true, and perhaps both of them are true. Either the general population speaks and writes the English language much worse than they did thirty years ago—or my perception of the

relative correctness of spoken and written language is much keener than it was thirty years ago. I suspect that both of these things are true.

In the *Abstract* of this thesis project, I recounted an experience I had at a local church my wife and I visited soon after we moved to San Marcos. While this experience made an impression on me, I do not believe it to be particularly unique. In August 2011, I found an advertisement for a local apartment complex attached to a pizza box with the following message: "It's not to late!! You can still live in a great community!" The advertisement included references to Texas State University. I presume that the vast majority of people who live in San Marcos, most of whom are college students, who read this advertisement, did not notice the error—or care. I honestly do not understand how someone who graduated from high school could make such a fundamental error; I distinctly remember learning the difference between *to*, *too*, and *two*—in the first grade.

I am a member of a Facebook group called "The Illiterati," which was created by a fellow graduate student in our English department. The primary purpose of the group is to submit examples of English writing that we encounter in ordinary life that are so bad, they are funny. A good example was posted this morning, January 24, 2012: "No matter how many times I break down, there is always a little piece of me thats says no your not done yet, get back up." This message was originally posted on another Facebook groups site entitled "Daily Inspiration and Motivation."

I try to be tolerant of the "bad" English I encounter from the general population; however, it is difficult for me to ignore substandard English when it comes from academia—produced by people who should know better. The scenario I describe in the *Abstract*, regarding my fellow graduate students' online reading response posts genuinely

surprised me. It is apparent to me that a general sense of apathy regarding the conventions of Standard English exists even in university English departments. Again, I ask the question: "Does it really matter?"

Evidenced by the errors, particularly in written English, that come to my attention on an almost daily basis—it does *not* matter to a great many people. Many Americans have an attitude of indifference regarding such basic concepts as spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage, and they apparently think that only a nerd would care about such things. Many of these people are extremely successful in their professional lives and make significantly more money than I do. I admit that I am not objective regarding this subject. In Chapter III, I commented on a former supervisor who used words such as "theyselves," in departmental emails. Despite the fact that he was my immediate superior and enjoyed a higher pay grade than I did—I considered him an idiot. I am willing to admit that my bias reflects a reality that may not be entirely accurate—but many people share my sentiments. I recently had a conversation with a human resource specialist who indicated that résumés received at their office, which contain misspelled words, are promptly and discreetly eliminated from consideration.

In Chapter I of this thesis, I briefly recount the history and development of the English language, to provide a historical perspective and to emphasize the fact that English is complex and often difficult to manage because of its multilingual origins from vastly different language groups that have different phonetic and grammatical structures. I cite English language scholars of past generations who, as early as the sixteenth century, express concerns regarding the threat of degradation of the English language of their day. I want to establish the fact that the integrity of English has been an ongoing concern

among scholars for many years, and not just the ravings of a few contemporary conservative fanatics. I discuss the concerns of speakers of other languages, concerning the integrity of their respective languages, including the establishment of government agencies such as *Académie française* and *Real Academia Española*—to underscore the fact that the threat of language degradation is a genuine concern of many people around the world. Upon describing the concerns of speakers of *other* languages that English may have a corrupting influence on their languages, I conclude that even Spanish, which has become ingrained in virtually every area of the continental United States, does not have a significant detrimental effect on English. I briefly discuss the relationship between British English and American English, and conclude that although there are a few differences such as the respective spellings of a few words, that the differences are not significant and are primarily phonological in nature.

Also in Chapter I, I briefly discuss the history and development of African American Vernacular English. I discuss the process by which black Africans, who came to the continental United States as slaves, speaking only their native languages, interacted with a variety of people who spoke many different languages, which resulted in the formation of a unique English dialect. However, I maintain that African Americans who wish to communicate with a universal audience, and not just within their own isolated group, need to be proficient in both spoken and written Standard English. I cite Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example of an influential African American who spoke and wrote very eloquent Standard English, such as in his "I Have a Dream" speech.

In Chapter II, I cite several scholars such as Knox, Davies, Quirk and Farrell, who offer their respective definitions of Standard English. In contrast, I cite scholars such as

Sledd, Bernstein, and Smitherman, who are critical of Standard English and consider it no more correct or legitimate than any other of the hundreds of dialects spoken or written all over the world, and even consider Standard English a dialect contrived by white elitists to assert superiority and domination over people of color and other minorities. Also in Chapter II, I discuss the 1974 CCCC resolution entitled "Students' Right to Their Own Language" and offer my criticism of the basic premises of the resolution. I also present my position that it is *not* inherently racist or an elitist plot to expect *all* students in elementary, secondary, and collegiate English classes to master the conventions of Standard English, regardless of their ethnicity or race. I also deny that Standard English is a "white" language or inextricably connected to "whiteness" in any way despite its historical connection to light-skinned Europeans.

In Chapter III, I examine component parts of Standard English. I consider aspects applicable only to spoken English, those applicable to both spoken and written English, as well as those applicable only to written English. In my analysis of the relationship between spoken and written English, I discover that in order to understand the idiosyncrasies of written English, it is necessary to examine the effect of phonology on the written language carefully, particularly with regards to spelling and similar-sounding words.

In Chapter IV, I identify several aspects of contemporary society that exert a corrupting influence on the integrity of Standard English. Although acknowledging that there are many factors that attempt to degrade English, I specifically examine three main areas: regional and ethnic subdialects, hip-hop music, and user-generated content Internet sites.

Despite the apparent perception to the contrary, I still maintain that the English language is a thing of beauty that should be protected from forces that seek to corrupt it. While alternate dialects may have their place within their respective contexts—and the linguistic anarchy that exists in user generated content sites on the Internet is not going to "go away" simply because I wish it—I still maintain that only Standard English is appropriate for academic writing and for writing that will be universally read by the general public, such as newspapers, magazines, and advertisement media such as signs and billboards. So, in answer to my hypothetical question, "does it really matter?"—the answer is *yes, it really does matter.*

If indeed Standard English, both spoken and written, deserves protection from forces that seek to corrupt it—what can be done? The battle should be—must be—fought in the schools. Our teachers are supposed to be the guardians of the integrity of the English language. Elementary, secondary, and college teachers are responsible for teaching their students the basic skills required to write Standard English effectively. There was a song, entitled *School Days*, which was very popular more than one hundred years ago, published in 1907, which contains the following lyrics: "School Days, School Days/ Dear old golden rule days/ Reading, and writing and arithmetic/ Taught to the tune of a hickory stick" (Cobb). While I do not advocate physical violence as a pedagogical technique, I firmly believe that language skills should be regarded seriously, even in the early grades. Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the basics of grammar and usage should be effectively taught by students actually writing, and their writing should be critically evaluated—and not just by filling in bubbles on a multiple-choice test sheet.

James D. Williams cites the following, stating that it was a note sent home to the parents of a third-grade student, written by his teacher: "Bobby was not allowed to go out for recess today becuz he had to re-do his paper on dinosors, becuz I do not allow students to type there papers only to hand write them and Bobby's paper was typed or printed. Pleeze make sure that Bobby don't type his papers in the future" (329). When I was entering the text of this note, I had to type it by hand because I could not force my voice recognition software[4] to misspell words. Also, I had to disable the "auto-correct" feature of Microsoft Word because it was correcting some of the errors as I typed them. Just to be clear, the words *because*, *dinosaurs*, and *please* are misspelled. *There* is used inappropriately—the word, in this case, should be *their*. *Don't* should be *doesn't*—a subject-verb agreement error.

When I read this note, I was angry and saddened at the thought that the children of our country are being taught by college graduates with state teaching certifications who themselves cannot write Standard English. Clearly, something is wrong. Williams states that "many teachers, especially those at the elementary level, can obtain a teaching credential without ever having taken a course on grammar and writing. Even most English teachers are not required to study grammar or composition, although they are primarily responsible for teaching grammar and writing in our schools" (317). Williams further states that many potential English teachers are exempt from even taking freshman composition classes because of their high SAT scores "under the incorrect assumption that students who read well and have large vocabularies [. . .] are able to write well" (317). Just as potential teachers are evaluated by tests such as the SAT, students in public schools are evaluated by standardized tests. Our students' literacy is determined by their

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[4] *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*, Version 10

ability to fill in bubbles with number-two pencils on multiple-choice scantrons. The rising generation—the hope of our future—is being allowed to graduate from high school without knowing how to construct a simple declarative sentence.

Admittedly, it was a few years ago, but I clearly remember weekly spelling tests and learning basic concepts of writing such as capitalizing the first word of a sentence, and the difference between *to, too* and *two*—in the first grade. Today, many high school students, and even some of the teachers, do not understand these basics. Part of the problem is the lack of value our society places on teachers, evidenced by the relatively low wages compared to jobs in the private sector. Also, teachers are required to expend an incredible amount of energy dealing with students' negative behavior. Many of them are idealistic and optimistic when they begin teaching, but resign their positions after just a few years. Ironically, the brightest and the best teachers are the ones who are leaving.

The English language has been evolving since it began more than 1500 years ago as a Germanic language that was not particularly unique. Because of its history, English has become very unique among languages of the world. The original Germanic language of the Anglo-Saxons has merged with many other languages—often by force. Each of these infusions of languages transformed English until it became the powerful instrument of expression through which great writers, such as William Shakespeare, were able to channel their artistic gifts.

English is my native language, and like many Americans, it is the only language I speak fluently. My love and admiration for the English language is the reason I chose to study it. In my lifetime, I have seen the decline of Standard English—especially in its written form. Unlike France and Spain, England and other English-speaking countries,

such as the United States, do not have government-sponsored language academies to

defend English from corruption. The only guardians we have to protect English from

imminent destruction are our schools—and the guardians have fallen asleep at their post.

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VITA

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This thesis was typed by Jack H. David, Jr. and Dorothy W. David, his wife.