The Linguistic Turn in Composition History and Students Right to Their Own Language

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THE LINGUISTIC TURN IN COMPOSITION HISTORY AND STUDENTS’ RIGHT TO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE

by

Elizabeth Baddour

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

The University of Memphis
May 2018
DEDICATION

To Richard Leo Enos
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although we write alone, a dissertation is really a collective of many generous, thoughtful people like my committee members who selflessly share their expertise and sacrifice their precious time in helping someone advance to the final stages of a daunting goal. With grateful appreciation I acknowledge my dissertation committee, Joseph G. Jones, William Duffy, Lyn Wright, and Richard Leo Enos for the time they invested on my behalf towards the completion of this project. I am particularly grateful to Joseph Jones for his patience, his insightful direction, and his support throughout the intervening years between my first graduate seminar class through every step in crafting this dissertation. Dr. Jones’s teaching is electric; the current of his influence I will carry with me as I continue to write and teach. The sagacious comments and suggestions offered by Will, Lyn and Rich have reminded me of the joys of discovery attendant with research and revision. That Rich, a renowned authority on rhetoric, deigned to respond to an email written by a student stranger looking to learn more about the subject of one of his recently published books is a testament to his benevolent spirit and his true commitment to sharing knowledge and wisdom. In 2008, I would never dare to hope that Rich would serve on my dissertation committee a decade later. In 2018, he is my mentor and dear friend. Rich has made writing a dissertation fun.

Apart from the grace of Christ my Savior, the dream of earning a Ph.D. would languish. In His sovereignty, He has given me my supportive husband Jim, who patiently abided the long years of my bookishness until time to come up for air. That time has come, at last!
ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Baddour, Ph.D. The University of Memphis. May 2018. The Linguistic Turn in Composition History and Students’ Right to Their Own Language. Professor: Joseph Jones, Ph.D.

“The Linguistic Turn in Composition History and Students’ Right to Their Own Language” examines the seventeen-year period of 1957 to 1974 to explore the role of what has been come to be known as the linguistic turn in making way for the acceptance of alternative dialects, affirmed with the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (CCCC) Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) Resolution in 1974. Linguistics was instrumental in enriching the ways writing is taught at the college level and augmented the discipline’s potential to propel a societal shift in our understanding of the interconnectedness of culture, identity, and language. The linguistic perspective advocated primarily by progressive Black scholars of the late mid-twentieth century invited a consideration that words and the way we use them are freighted with persuasive elements—elements containing touches of identity, tidbits of hidden meaning, traces of hegemony. It is from this viewpoint that the role of linguistics and composition intersect to form the central argument of this dissertation: the linguistic turn led to the SRTOL Resolution and new perspectives in teaching writing that continue to shape college composition instruction in the twenty-first century. Using historiography, this project examines the major influences upon the initiation of the linguistic turn to better understand it in relation to the broader political and cultural events of that time period. Doing so further illustrates the parallel relationship of changes in American culture during the years under study with developments in composition instruction—particularly relative to African American students newly admitted to the academy following the end
of institutional segregation. The linguistic turn created space for the SRTOL Resolution that ultimately influenced subsequent pedagogical theories regarding college composition instruction and acceptance of linguistic pluralism in college composition.
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CHAPTER ONE

Identity, Ideology, and Introspection: The Shadows Lurking in Language

“Classroom language is never just about classroom language, but intersecting fields of historical, social, and political inputs/outputs that exist in no neutral relationship to one another . . . ” (Perryman-Clark et al. 8)

Composition studies, as a discipline, is characterized by several juxtapositions. For example, composition studies is quite possibly the oldest, and yet the newest discipline within the humanities. Its past has an undeniable connection to Isocrates, the father of the humanities, and the rich history of writing instruction that stretches back in time to the ancient rhetorical tradition of the Greeks and Romans. In spite of the 2,500-year history of writing instruction and its centrality to education throughout the intervening millennia between antiquity and the twenty-first century, Robert Connors observes, “Writing was the most often taught of college subjects and by a great measure the least examined” (Composition-Rhetoric 15). Connors, along with James Berlin, Maureen Daly Goggin, Sharon Crowley, Albert Kitzhaber, James Kinneavy, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Richard Leo Enos, James J. Murphy, and John Brereton are among the many scholars who have chronicled engaging and comprehensive aspects of the history and evolution of composition studies, which traces its modern emergence to 1963.

The year 1963 is formative in that it marks a transition from writing instruction as a static enterprise detached from research efforts for most of the twentieth century to one grounded upon theory substantiated by fieldwork. Around 1963, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer’s Research in Written Composition and Kitzhaber’s “Report of the Dartmouth Study of Student Writing” were significant research projects that helped propel the
discipline into an introspective view of itself even in its nascent stage as a new area of specialization within English departments. The changing dynamics within American culture during this time necessitated deep reflection on the part of composition instructors in coming to terms with the new task of teaching writing in an increasingly diverse college environment.

At a time in which student writing was easily characterized as an infirmed permutation of “healthy” writing, America’s perceived literacy crisis affected yet another generation of collegians. The disconnect between effective teaching strategies of the past and the relatively ineffective methods then in place carved out space for compositionists to seriously interrogate the very nature of the writing process and the ideologies undergirding its practice. An interdisciplinary approach led compositionists to appropriate principles from linguistic science to aid writing teachers in addressing the complex questions that were foundational in composition instruction praxis. Questions such as: What is “standard” English? Is it ethical to demand a student to compromise her home language in service to adherence to a so-called “standard”? Is the ideology of standardization compatible with democratic principles of education? How can the conundrum of teaching and assessing writing that deviates from what English teachers understand as “correct” be reconciled? These questions, raised primarily by progressive Black scholars in the late mid-twentieth century, will likely continue to inform composition pedagogy for generations to come because, as Erika Lindemann argues, “Paradoxically, change is a constant in all languages. . . . Language change is neither good nor bad; it simply is”1 (99). Finally able to wrest itself from the static conception of

1 Emphasis is Lindemann’s.
language as a sorting mechanism fenced by rules, compositionists began to wrestle with another juxtaposition: grasping language as a resource that can be manipulated in the interest of rhetorical expression, rather than merely using language as a means through which to manipulate student writers (Lindemann 99). Linguistics was instrumental in enriching the ways writing is taught at the college level and augmented the discipline’s potential to propel a societal shift in our understanding of the interconnectedness of culture, identity, and language. Apart from the activism of Black scholars and the efforts of the Black Caucus to enact social change in the college writing classroom, composition pedagogy may have remained an unchallenged reflection of a society entrenched in the complacency of the linguistic manifestation of prejudice.

Writing instruction’s rebirth as a dynamic field informed by expanded research and graduate programs resulted in subsequent theoretical implications for writing pedagogies. However, as Janice Lauer recounts, a pivotal point in the emergence of composition studies was borne of a juxtaposition that is a frequent theme throughout this dissertation: the pervasive and powerful “sense of dissonance between their [instructor’s] responsibility for teaching writing and the inadequacy of their understanding and training for doing so” (“Composition Studies” 21). This awkward choreography between composition student and composition teacher was particularly evident in the writing classrooms of 1957-1974—a time in which culture and college composition collided as social movements such as Black Power combined with a variety of protests to collectively rouse Americans from the passive acceptance of racism and social injustice as a way of life. Compositionists found themselves at the center of the struggle to effectively assimilate students who, because of their socio-economic or racial status, were
strangers to the newly integrated and diverse college writing classroom, which heretofore, only accommodated iterations of “standard” English.

A complementary relationship with linguistics enabled composition to progress in step with the changing demographics of a new era. Scholars including James Sledd, Ernice Kelley, and Geneva Smitherman boldly challenged the profession to re-vision its role beyond “right” or “wrong” value judgments in writing instruction and instead, view itself as a discipline practicing the profoundly rhetorical act of communication—contesting the prevailing assumption that words and the grammar governing them are either “correct” or “incorrect.” The linguistic perspective these progressive scholars advocated invited a consideration that words are freighted with persuasive elements—elements containing touches of identity, tidbits of hidden meaning, traces of hegemony. It is from this viewpoint that the role of linguistics and composition intersect to form the central argument of this dissertation: the linguistic turn led to the Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) Resolution and new perspectives in teaching writing.

Because the “linguistic turn” is a central focus of this project, the definition of the term is essential to its argument. Simply stated, the linguistic turn embodies a pedagogical shift from prescriptive methodologies—which enjoyed prominence in writing instruction during the first half of the twentieth century—to a practice that includes a consideration of the cultural significance of a student’s home dialect. Through an approach using contrastive analysis, or pattern recognition in language usage, the linguistic turn created avenues for the acceptance of the pluralism of English dialects and made way for an appreciation of the rhetorical dimensions of everyday communication.

“The Linguistic Turn in Composition History and Students’ Right to Their Own
Language” examines the major influences upon the initiation of the linguistic turn in order to better understand English composition pedagogy in relation to the broader political and cultural events of that time period. Doing so further illustrates the complementary relationship of changes in American culture during the years under study, with developments in composition instruction as it particularly relates to African American students. Because the term “Black English” was commonly used to describe the dialect of African Americans during the time period of this project, Black English is the term most often used throughout this dissertation. However, African American English (AAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Black Language (BL) are also used interchangeably and most often within quoted material.

This dissertation adds to the conversation surrounding socio-cultural forces that contributed to changes in writing instruction as compositionists acted and reacted in response to issues related to diversity and inclusion at the intersection of writing instruction during the time period under study. With the successes of the long civil rights movement, compositionists struggled to overcome the dissonance between traditional ways of teaching that were particularly ineffective in the wake of the newly diverse student body. Many composition instructors, increasingly challenged to implement social justice through language rights in the college writing classrooms, found success through the linguistic turn in composition history. The social exigencies of the time period required action; this dissertation is an accounting of how scholars moved to counter the normative standards that subtly enforced hegemony in language practices.

As the academy’s mission evolved from a nineteenth-century perspective of cultural indoctrination of the privileged to preparing a wide array of students for the
modern American workforce, the college composition classroom found itself on the front lines in responding to America’s changing attitudes toward women, African Americans, and others who came from backgrounds touched by economic, class, gender, or ethnic marginalization and bias. Accordingly, the seventeen-year period of 1957 to 1974 is central to exploring the role of the linguistic turn in making way for the acceptance of alternative dialects, affirmed with the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (CCCC) SRTOL Resolution in 1974. The social and political movements particular to this timeframe in many ways influenced the acceptance of the Resolution and development of subsequent pedagogical theories regarding college composition instruction. The beginning point of 1957 marks the initiation of the linguistic turn in composition history attributed to Juanita Williamson as identified by Keith Gilyard; the end point of 1974 marks the ratification of SRTOL by CCCC membership.

Using historiography, I trace the beginning of the linguistic turn at its start with the scholarship of Williamson, first published in 1957, and chart the influence of linguistic scholarship on writing instruction in context of a society in flux from homogeneity to heterogeneity concomitant with desegregation. Extant texts and professional journals published during this timeframe provide a rich backdrop to a discipline struggling mightily to reconcile its deeply entrenched ways of doing the business of teaching writing against its ethos as a thoroughly democratic, egalitarian enterprise. The linguistic turn in composition history is inextricably linked to the SRTOL Resolution for its recognition that linguistic hierarchies privileging one dialect over another are antithetical to the aims of a society ostensibly working to rid itself of remnants of prejudice in its institutions of higher education. In the divisive political
climate of the present, the linguistic turn in composition history reminds us of the necessity of working out our differences—linguistic and otherwise—in order to subvert the looming dissonance that is all too often wrongly attributed to difference.

A dearth of scholarship addressing the linguistic turn in composition history and its relationship to the SRTOL Resolution is the impetus for this study. Accordingly, my project attempts to fill this lacuna by offering an alternative perspective on the role that linguistics brings to bear on writing instruction during the years between Williamson’s 1957 essay and the ratification of SRTOL in 1974. In identifying who and what the major influences were upon the initiation of the linguistic turn, we might better appreciate the impact of the broader political and cultural events of that era. This analysis is particularly beneficial from a contemporary perspective in understanding the complementary relationship of changes in American culture to language and how best to accommodate and serve composition students from diverse backgrounds in the study of language.

Coming alongside the scholarship of stalwarts of our discipline in charting its history, I envision this dissertation adding a subtle layer of complexity in connecting our discipline’s past to its future. This dissertation invites its readers to see the linguistic turn as I see it—as one of composition studies’ most intriguing juxtapositions: while the linguistic turn may not have changed anything, it quietly changed everything. In bringing attention to the social and rhetorical dimensions of language, the linguistic turn carved out space for composition studies to broaden the breadth and depth of the study of language and the interplay of culture, society, and language.

This study came about as a result of a couple of paragraphs from Gilyard’s 1999 essay, “African American Contributions to Composition Studies,” in which Gilyard
“traces a line of thought from early rhetors and scholars to contemporary researchers, thinkers, and practitioners that both emphasize critical pedagogy and values Black culture, especially its vernacular language” (626). Included among the many influential Black intellectuals Gilyard mentions include W.E.B. Du Bois and linguists Carter G. Woodson, Lorenzo D. Turner, and Darwin Turner. Du Bois figures prominently in Gilyard’s catalog of early advocates of African American higher education for Du Bois’s appeal to Black professors to “become more politically engaged” (Gilyard 629). Gilyard notes Du Bois’s call for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to “make provision for research-based, ‘scientific teaching’ of writing to adults” (Gilyard 629). The scientific approach to writing to which Du Bois refers? Linguistics.

Gilyard bridges the early twentieth-century Du Boisian humanistic ideal for a turn to science through the talents of Williamson, who was then a doctoral candidate from the University of Michigan’s Linguistics Department. Among America’s first Black linguists, Gilyard points to Williamson’s 1957 CLA Journal essay which advocates writing instruction that utilizes “scientific teaching” to better prepare Black students for the rigors of college writing. Of Williamson, Gilyard writes: “In the inaugural issue, Juanita Williamson of LeMoyne College published an essay, ‘What Can We Do About It?—The Contribution of Linguistics to the Teaching of English,’ signaling the main direction to be taken by the next generation of African American scholars and researchers” (633). Williamson’s essay came at a time in which African Americans were slowly beginning to integrate formerly all-white college classrooms, and dialects of diversity presented challenges to traditional ways of teaching English composition. However, the seeds of a new approach to writing instruction were sewn prior to 1957 as
linguistic science offered composition a broadened conception of composition pedagogy as infinitely more than the production of a formulaic five-paragraph theme.

**Chapter Overviews**

Before linguistics began influencing instruction in composition, anthropology influenced the science of linguistics, as discussed in Chapter Two, “Linguistics and Composition Instruction 1910-1957.” While the intent of this project is not to provide a comprehensive history of structural linguistics, it is one goal of this dissertation to assert that the work of several prominent early twentieth-century linguistic scholars formed a foundation for the relationship of linguistics to writing instruction that coincided with the end of the first World War. Claude Levi Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Carpenter Fries, and Leonard Bloomfield are among the European and American founders of structural linguistics, a term that is frequently used interchangeably with descriptive linguistics (Fries 1).

While others including Bernard Bloch, Charles Hockett, Warner G. Rice and Harold Allen have written at length about the contributions of these and other linguistics pioneers, there is a scarcity of scholarship connecting the relationship of the foundational premises of structural linguistics and its implication as a harbinger to the SRTOL Resolution and the subsequent development of progressive theories in college composition instruction. Consequently, it is important to present a truncated historical

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2 Linguist Bernard Bloch, was long-time editor of the journal *Language*. Charles Hockett’s text, *A Course in Modern Linguistics*, remained the standard for structural linguistics for two decades. Warner G. Rice was chair of the English Department at the University of Michigan, and his scholarship was devoted to the future of English studies. Harold B. Allen, a former president of NCTE, studied linguistics under Charles C. Fries at mid-century.
context of the major movements toward structural/descriptive linguistics to illustrate how the increased emphasis on linguistics in writing instruction informs the linguistic turn and the shift toward a student-centered pedagogy. Chapter Two provides a historical context for the changes that would come in composition instruction toward the latter third of the twentieth century with the affirmation of the SRTOL Resolution. Tracing the antecedents of Williamson and others who were instrumental in the appropriation of linguistic science as a complement to writing instruction, Chapter Two is an overview of the emergence of a fracture in composition pedagogy in which prescriptivism—the ways in which some believe language ought to be used—is pitted against descriptivism, or the study of how language is actually used. Structural linguistics (loosely defined as the scientific study of language) increasingly informs approaches to composition pedagogy as two emerging views of language come into focus: a social view of language that regards English as a “living” dialect that evolves within its culture; and a scientific view of language which values the study of the changing nature of language. Both the social and the scientific view of language complement the descriptivist view of the malleability of the English language, and the incompatibility of prescriptivist rules that limit the epistemic function of a living language.

During this time of socio-cultural flux, rhetoric scholars endeavored to advance the benefits of rhetorically based theories of writing instruction that would anchor the subject to English departments in the form of a union with composition. Just as linguists were essentially divided into two opposing camps—structuralists (or descriptivists) versus prescriptivists—scholars through the generations often tended to bifurcate rhetoric in accordance to its epistemic function as either a locus of knowledge production, or a
demonstration of knowledge possession. The argument that Plato began in antiquity regarding the nature of rhetoric as an art or a science persisted even as the modern university began to take shape. As John Brereton, Robert Connors and others note, English departments in the early twentieth century sought to negate the diminishing status of English studies through a wider acceptance in academe by legitimizing the discipline through science that linguistics helped to perpetuate.

One scholar who figures prominently in the linguistic turn is detailed in Chapter Three, “Juanita Williamson: A Voice for Change in Composition Pedagogy.” This chapter introduces an important yet unlikely figure in advancements toward acceptance of dialects of difference in composition pedagogy. Research gathered in a currently dismantled archive at the HBCU where she served generations of Black collegians reveals the passion of a dedicated African American pedagogue who argued that the push to embrace Black English was yet another means by which to subvert her race through linguistic prejudice. Williamson argued that the nineteen-seventies’ trend to promote Black English was an affront to African Americans, who had every right to become adept with the language of all Americans. She insisted that any dialect other than so-called “standard” English would always be considered unequal, and by inference, inferior.

Largely overshadowed by history, this chapter gives an account of the influence of Williamson, one of the first African American linguists to boldly express her ideas, her scholarship, and her presence at academic platforms at a time in which Jim Crow dictates prevailed. Williamson, a proponent of descriptivism, argued for an approach to language

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3 For a fuller account of the history of composition, see John Brereton’s *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College 1875-1925: A Documentary History* and Robert Connors’s *Composition Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy.*
that considered a student’s home dialect appropriate in situational contexts and worthy of respect. However, Williamson privileged “standard” English as a means of access to power at a time in which African Americans such as Williamson herself had to seek higher education in Northern states that allowed integrated college classrooms during the waning years of Jim Crow legislation. Chapter Three details the competing philosophies of Smitherman and Williamson, two prominent mid-century linguists who, while adopting the validity of rhetoric in composition instruction, did so with widely divergent philosophies that have lasting ramifications into the twenty-first century.

Although Smitherman and Williamson disagreed on the superiority of “standard” English in college composition classrooms, both lauded the value of a student’s language of nurture and the need to foster positivity in instructor attitudes toward Black culture, even as the civil rights movement neared its arc. This chapter argues that both scholars contributed significantly to the move away from prescriptivist practices in composition writing instruction, and in many ways served to pave the way for the development of SRTOL and the pluralism of dialectal acceptance.

Chapter Four, “The Personal and the Political: Voices Leading to SRTOL,” explores how large social forces became the impetus for educational policy as scholar/activists including Smitherman and the CCCC Black Caucus demanded change. As academic theories regarding composition pedagogies collided with societal and cultural shifts ushered in by the tumult of the nineteen-sixties, academic activists made strides in creating space for social justice in the college composition classroom in the decade immediately preceding the SRTOL Resolution. Because language is a marker of identity both as an individual and as a member of a group or community, language
functions well beyond the role as a communicative device; it is a signifier of who we are—making judgments upon the way we use words a delicate issue. In examining the relationship of identity and language in context of social movements including Black Power, Black Nationalism, and the civil rights movement, this chapter uncovers the impact of these movements in exposing the gaping maw of white privilege that led to theories that altered traditional approaches to composition pedagogy.

While the social upheaval accompanying the decade of the nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies gave rise to cultural chaos, it also invited opportunities—opportunities to redress pervasive inequities inherent in the complicated dance between culture and composition pedagogy. Compositionists were beginning to come around to the potential their unique positions as agents of change afforded them in the slow subversion of discriminatory practices through language pedagogy.

Chapter Five, “SRTOL Reality and Retrospective,” views the 1974 Resolution from the vantage point of nearly fifty years to examine what, if anything, SRTOL changed. Chapter Five also details the challenges composition instructors faced in grappling with what Smitherman terms the “linguistic mismatch” between newly integrated diverse students and their white counterparts. The CCCC, as a professional organization supporting college English instructors, was tasked with leading its members through implementation of guidelines in the form of the SRTOL Resolution (Smitherman, “Historical” 19). However, an important aspect of Chapter Five is the fact that support for SRTOL was not univocal, as scholarly debate surrounding the primacy of so called “standard” English was vociferous and at times, even rancorous. In spite of the socio-political whirlwind of the turbulent nineteen-sixties to early nineteen seventies, the
social upheaval gave rise to opportunities to rectify the ways in which traditional methods of composition pedagogy mirrored larger discriminatory practices. Unlike other disciplines, composition found itself in the unique position among academic disciplines to do something about it. Beginning with the recognition that linguistic inequities are shadows of racism, compositionists worked to enact social justice though a statement affirming the validity of all dialects through SRTOL.

Chapter Six examines the legacy of SRTOL and what if anything the Resolution changed. “Re-invigorating Students’ Right to Their Own Language: Contemporary Pedagogical Implications of the SRTOL Resolution” considers the ways in which SRTOL continues to shape composition instruction. The Resolution establishes a line of query that asks, “What should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds?” (CCCC, “Explanation” 2). The drafters of SRTOL would have no way of knowing the far-reaching implications that the Resolution would have for generations of future compositionists—if not by its praxis, then by its very existence. While scholars debate the overall effectiveness of SRTOL in composition pedagogy, one thing is clear: the Resolution stands as a highlight in composition history for its deterministic view of linguistic equality in the composition classroom. Accordingly, the final chapter examines three essential aspects of the SRTOL Resolution and its legacy: the Resolution’s role in raising the profession’s consciousness regarding attitudes and language; SRTOL’s influence in promoting a democratic educational ideal through acceptance of linguistic diversity; and the influence of SRTOL in paving the way for a critical analysis of ideologies that inform cultural practices highlighted by the Resolution. Finally, Chapter
Six identifies three trends that embody the modern manifestations of the SRTOL Resolution, including Critical Discourse Analysis, Raciolinguistics, and anti-racist writing assessment. Each of these approaches interrogates the ways in which power struggle is enacted through language and challenges students and instructors to engage critical pedagogy in understanding the sometimes insidious reach of ideology through the deceptively simply currency of words. In consideration of the viability of SRTOL in the twenty-first century, it is imperative that compositionists open up spaces for dialogue in college classrooms to interrogate competing ideological positions regarding language issues in order to better understand SRTOL’s function as an interruption to the status quo through critical education.

Scholars and theorists such as James Berlin and Paulo Freire have taken the position that education is not a neutral enterprise. Ideology, as explained by Berlin, reflects power relations in a society:

Ideology also ( . . .) includes conceptions of how power should ( . . .) be distributed in a society. Power here means political force but covers as well social forces in everyday contacts. Power is an intrinsic part of ideology, defined and reinforced by it, determining, once again, who can act and what can be accomplished. These power relationships, furthermore, are inscribed in the discursive practices of daily experience-in the ways we use language and are used (interpellated) by it in ordinary parlance. Finally, it should be noted that ideology is always pluralistic, a given historical moment displaying a variety of competing ideologies and a given individual reflecting one or another permutation of these conflicts, although the overall effect of
these permutations tends to support the hegemony of the dominant class. ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 481)

A publication aimed at college professors describing their Black students with the umbrella term “ghetto negroes” exemplifies the political undertones of the use of such a blanket term. The term is rhetorical in that attitudes are communicated through the presence—or absence—of linguistic markers that confer, or elide human dignity. The linguistic turn made way for the SRTOL Resolution and the linkage of literate practices with ideology, and the recognition that all dialects are verbal shadows of personhood.
CHAPTER TWO

Linguistics and Composition Instruction: 1910-1957

“God does not much mind bad grammar, but He does not take any particular pleasure in it.” Erasmus

As the long and ancient history of writing instruction attests, cultural phenomena wield enormous influence upon higher education and the pedagogical practices that inform it. Writing as artifact, is a form of cultural and personal expression. Because “composition-rhetoric exists at the intersection of what a society reads and what it feels it should be able to express,” the subject of writing instruction engenders so much passion, elicits so much argument, and ignites so much controversy regarding how it is best undertaken from generation to generation (Connors, Composition Rhetoric 17).

Composition instruction, not unlike society itself, is an ever-evolving epic wafting between “the push of societal pressure and the inertia of academic traditions” (17). The fervid arguments surrounding evolving pedagogies in writing instruction are exemplified in the contestations between the “old” versus the “new” by way of a backward glance at composition history from a contemporary perspective. Specifically, this chapter examines the tensions between linguistic descriptivism, defined loosely as the study of how language is actually used—versus prescriptivism or the study of how some believe language ought to be used. The setting for the tug between the old and familiar pedagogical practice of strict adherence to rules (prescriptivism) and the challenge linguistic descriptivism presented to “traditional” writing instruction plays out at the dawn of the twentieth century and continues to 1957, and beyond.
The journey toward the professionalism of rhetoric and composition initially began with an expanded view of human communication through the science of linguistics and an appreciation of the social dimension of discourse (Crowley 481). Linguistic scholars Claude Levi Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure were among many scholars of the early twentieth century whose research expanded the notion of human thought and communication apart from the parameters that many researchers assumed were primarily associated with socio-cultural assumptions such as race. Strauss and Saussure would influence later generations of theorists in fields as diverse as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Among those influenced by Saussure and Strauss was prominent American linguist Leonard Bloomfield, a founding member of the Linguistic Society of America (Falk 471). Bloomfield published *An Introduction to the Study of Language* in 1914, lauded as a “major work of the period” which came shortly after his postdoctoral studies that same year (Falk 469). Designed for “the general reader and student of linguistics,” the text espouses a scientific view of linguistics founded on a study of phonetics buttressed by an examination of the history of the English language (Falk 470). Bloomfield is significant to this study for his contributions to the science of structural linguistics from which the essential concept of descriptivism arises.

Before continuing, two important yet complex terms merit a simple definition. Patrick Harwell’s “Grammar, Grammar and the Teaching of Grammar” and Theresa Enos’s *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient times to the Information Age* offer serviceable definitions for key terms in this chapter: grammar and linguistics. Grammar is “the internalized system of language that native speakers of language share” (Hartwell 106). Generally, most people understand grammar
as “a set of normative rules concerning language usage” such as avoiding ending a sentence with a preposition (Winterowd 289). Linguistics is the description of how people groups actually use language (Weiser 387). By contrast traditional grammar is the field of study within linguistics that teaches the structure of a language apart from scientific basis. The study of grammar from a non-linguistic perspective is generally geared toward the way in which language “should” be used in accordance with perceived cultural standards. Contemporary linguists eschew such prescriptivism for the more complex task of documenting and analyzing language from a descriptive perspective that must account for all possible productions and judgments.

The Roots of Descriptivism

In its simplest form, the linguistic debate relative to English composition pedagogy is essentially bifurcated between arguments privileging prescriptivism versus descriptivism. To greatly oversimplify, prescriptivists adhere conservatively and intractably to rules of grammar, whereas descriptivists appreciate the changing nature of language and its relationship to the culture in which it is situated. To better understand the ideological divide separating linguistic prescriptivists and their descriptivist counterparts, Henry F. Thoma, author of *Modern Composition and Rhetoric*, offers the following definition from his 1957 essay published in *College Composition and Communication*: “Prescriptive grammar teaches how someone believes the language ought to be used; whereas descriptive grammar tells how it is used” (37). More to the point, Thoma clarifies his definition by suggesting the ideological undertones that inform the differing views when he states, “We may say that one [prescriptivism] takes a moral view, the other [descriptivism] a scientific one” (37). Thoma observed that linguistic
research challenged prescriptivists’ understanding of the fluidity of that which comprises “correct” language. Thoma’s compositionist-minded permutation of the linguistic terms prescriptivism and descriptivism comprise the operative definitions of these key terms for the purpose of this chapter. The next section takes up the ways in which the debates regarding changing methodologies in composition instruction played out in professional journals of the time period under study.

From a linguistic perspective, descriptivism traces its origins in the early twentieth century with the socio-anthropological work of linguists such as Franz Boas. Boas’s study of near extinct languages from around the world led to an understanding that previously undiscovered languages, though dissimilar to the classical languages of Greek and Latin, were nonetheless rule driven and systematic. Through their anthropological and linguistics research, descriptivists were influential in divorcing prescriptivists from their contention that all forms of human language share universal linguistic categories such as verb inflection. For example, contrary to English’s traditional subject/verb order, Boas observes that in some cultures, the verb precedes the subject. Boas notes that the Burushaski language of Pakistan differentiates between four genders, and that Kalam, a language of Papua New Guinea, has fewer than 100 verbs (Hitchings 16). The research of Boas, Hitchings and other socio-anthropologists contributed to the fact that language is a product of the culture that creates it (Hitchings 16). This break from traditional linguistics was a departure from the prescriptivists’ prevailing view that there is one universal grammar for all humans, and reflects linguistics’ origins from anthropology.

One prominent leader in the turn away from prescriptivism is American structural
linguist Leonard Bloomfield, who is perhaps best remembered for “the practical applications [of linguistics] to the teaching of reading and the study of foreign languages” (Bloch 89). Bloomfield legitimized the field of language study through his pioneering 1933 book Language, which “revealed the possibilities of scientific discourse about language” and paved the way for an expansion of linguistics beyond the domain of the sciences (Bloch 92). Bloomfield’s Language marked a division between the “state of linguistic methods” before his book’s publication, and the approach to linguistics he advocated that became “matters of orthodoxy” due to Bloomfield’s innovations in the field of descriptive linguistics (Bloch 91). Bernard Bloch, an influential post-Bloomfieldian linguist, writes of the significance of Language, arguing, “It also pointed the direction that linguistics was to take in the immediate future. It is not too much to say that every significant refinement of analytic method produced in this country after 1933 has come as a direct result of the impetus given linguistic research by Bloomfield’s book” (92). Bloomfield’s contributions to the advancement of descriptivism through his work in linguistic structuralism increasingly informed English compositionists’ move away from traditional prescriptivist practices even as linguistics was appropriated by English instructors to support the teaching of writing. It is in this context that Bloomfield’s importance as a linguist is of value to this study.

Bloomfield, through his structural approach to understanding language, realized that “the best way to study language is to understand it as consisting of certain smaller structural elements” that are ordered and recurrent (Meier 3). Bloomfield’s approach to language would influence later twentieth-century linguistic theorists Geneva Smitherman and Juanita Williamson in advancing the concept that African American Vernacular
English (AAVE) is itself a rule driven and systematic language, as opposed to the view AAVE is a permutation of standard English. Chapter Three takes up the implications of Williamson and Smitherman’s scholarship in greater detail.

**Professional Journals: Carriers of Composition Conversation**

Emblematic of the discussions among English professionals are the conversations taking place in journals widely read by composition practitioners, for as Robert J. Connors declares, “The journals of an academic discipline provide a clear reflection of that discipline’s past, a synchronic portrait of its current state, and a glimpse of its dreams and plans for the future” (“Journals” 348). As linguistics increasingly began to influence writing instruction, controversy soon followed in professional journals as English instructors became deeply entrenched either on the side of prescriptivists, who held a traditionally based view of language, or their counterparts, the descriptivists, who esteemed a more modern, scientific approach to language study.

A survey of periodicals including NCTE’s *English Journal* and *College English* published from 1919 through the 1950s reveals a blossoming interest in linguistics as an aid in teaching English composition. A representative sampling of essays written prior to 1950 indicate two emerging views of language based on the influence of structural linguistics: a social view of language and a scientific view of language. Structural linguistics, or the scientific study of language, focuses on naturally occurring language and privileges the role of audience in communication above adherence to rules—as opposed to predetermined “correct” forms. A scientific view of language values the study of the changing nature of the English language. These two viewpoints complement the descriptivist argument that rules governing writing and speech evolve with the English
language, which is itself in flux with the culture that employs it. A social view of language regards English as a “living” dialect responding to and influenced by cultural dynamics. The growing awareness that cultural dynamics assert influence on the way Americans speak and write solidified descriptivists’ perspective that a hallmark of the English language, or any language, is its fluidity.

As early as 1919, tension between prescriptivists and descriptivists played out in professional public forums almost as soon as linguistics emerged as a possible supplement to composition instruction. In addition to these views, linguistic study offered freedom, as Ella Heaton Pope argues in her 1919 The English Journal essay, “Linguistics as a Required Subject in College and in High School.” Pope writes of linguistics, “It [linguistic study] prevents slavish obedience to the hairsplitting and often groundless distinctions as to usage and punctuation that are advocated by extreme purists (30). Traditional grammar instruction impugned by Pope was highly valued for the mental discipline it supposedly inculcated. The “mind-as-muscle” corollary gained credence as early as 1856 with an article written for the American Journal of Education by a teacher identified only as Z. Richards, who writes: “Mental discipline . . . may be defined as being such a development and training of all the mental powers or faculties, by habitual exercise, as will most effectively exhibit their native power and give the subject full control over them . . . To acquire this ought to be the great aim of education” (19).

Richards’s above referenced argument for the necessity of grammar drills is indicative of eighteenth and nineteenth century pedagogical praxis that held sway even into the early twentieth century. William F. Woods, writing in “The Cultural Tradition of Nineteenth-Century ‘Traditional’ Grammar Teaching” notes that during the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries, it was essential for the rising middle class to acquire “a fixed and easily accessible standard which they could adopt” as they moved upward economically and socially (7). At the same time, ironically, “the upper classes were hoping that such a standard would be a means of distinguishing between the true aristocrat and the gilded arriviste” (7). Grammar, wielded as a marker of class, functioned as a remnant of eighteenth-century belles-lettres who, in their advocacy of cultural conformance to standards of “good taste” maintain: “No grammatical rules have sufficient authority to control the firm and established usage of language. Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style” (Blair 91). Nonconformance to prescriptive rules of grammar is a barometer—a cultural shibboleth—that is useful in screening those who are either “unwilling or unable to acquire habits of the schooled middle-class” (Williams 13). Proper grammar for eighteenth and nineteenth-century citizens indicated “propriety,” and this accounts in part for the staying power of grammar skill and drill exercises in composition instruction. Another factor in the pervasiveness of traditional grammar pedagogy involves prescriptivists’ understanding of how language works. It is here that the distinctions between prescriptivism and descriptivism are clearly divergent. Whereas descriptivists observe how language is used, prescriptivists proscribe language use. Woods, writing from the historical perspective of 1985 explains:

In our own times, grammarians manipulate models, trying to account for the way the patterns of our language are produced. But for most eighteenth and early nineteenth century grammarians, the ‘rules’ of accidence and syntax were the actual principles of how the language worked. They were like a ‘program’ for using the language. It
followed that memorizing—actually, ‘internalizing’—prescriptive rules of grammar was an essential part of learning to write and speak correctly. Applying the rules in actual composition or conversation came second, for once a student knew the principles of speaking and writing, only facility was lacking, and students had their whole lives ahead of them to practice in. (7)

As Woods’s observation indicates, descriptivism not only presented challenges to prescriptivists’ ways of teaching writing, but also called into question the very fundamentals upon which their pedagogical theories were based. Add to this mix the age-old problem of students who were deemed underprepared for the rigors of college composition. The problem became severe enough to warrant the attention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) who convened in 1928 to address “problems of the English language courses in our universities and colleges” (Moore et al. 826). The problem that brought the committee of English professors from a variety of institutions together appeared to be their concern over “persistence in language errors” (Moore et al. 826). The committee, which included two University of Michigan scholars, linguist C.C. Fries and English professor Samuel Moore, sought consensus regarding curriculum changes needed to “adopt vigorous means for remedying what seems to be the serious situation” facing English teachers in 1928 (Moore et al. 825). The NCTE-commissioned report states its readiness to adopt a scientific perspective of language study in an effort to collectively resist prescriptivist practices in college composition instruction. The report indicates that studies up to the point of their meeting “are based upon common assumptions concerning the English language which perpetuate an eighteenth century point of view which have long been discarded by linguistic scholarship” (Moore et al.
The “eighteenth-century point of view” to which the NCTE report refers indicates a shift away from prescriptivism toward the study of English that is “studied specifically from a linguistic point of view” (Moore et al. 832). The report encourages an analysis of “some living grammatical problems studied in the spirit of Professor Fries’s *Teaching of the English Language*,” asserting that Fries’s text “give[s] our future teachers an inkling of the revolution which has taken place in our whole attitude toward grammar, and may persuade them to adopt the modern viewpoint toward issues (...) in their classrooms” (Moore et al. 833). The 1928 Report acknowledges the necessity of English instructors to “acquire a scientific point of view toward language” which includes study of principles of general linguistics (827).

Two years later in 1930, Robert L. Ramsay, author of the Appendix to 1928’s NCTE-commissioned report entitled “First Report of the National Council’s Committee on English Language Courses in Colleges and Universities” writes:

The old-fashioned grammarian knew, perhaps, that language changes, but he hated to admit it and he usually concealed it most effectually from his pupils. The modern teacher makes the conception of language as a living organism, a thing of growth and development, the very center of his teaching; and he lets it work the same revolution which the conception of evolution and organic growth has worked so fundamentally in every other branch of human knowledge. (227)

Ramsay argued for a greater emphasis on the teaching of linguistics in conjunction with English composition instruction, conflating linguistics as a means through which instructors might find rescue from the “problems of our English curriculum” (220).

Ramsay heralds the scientific study of linguistics within English departments for
its potential to revolutionize writing instruction. Ramsay asserts, “When the study of language [linguistics] wins its rightful place in the curriculum and is recognized as an equal member of the English family, there are many little helps and kindnesses which it will extend to the more efficient teaching both of composition and literature” (228). Ramsay illustrates his point by decrying a speech teacher’s insistence that students use only the “refined” eastern seaboard accent when pronouncing words such as “bath” and “dance” (228). Ramsay maintains that the study of phonetics and the history of English pronunciation would open avenues for linguistic pluralism through which students might learn how written and oral language evolves within a culture. Adopting a “scientific view” of language instruction is, according to Ramsay, valuable in teaching students how words and pronunciation “succeed each other in the usage of cultured speakers” (229).

Around the mid nineteen-thirties, the time in which the early prescriptivist/descriptivist debates began in earnest among compositionists, British linguist J. R. Firth propounded insightful theories regarding language use and identity construction. Firth theorized that while we are “born [as] individuals,” personhood is attained through learning language and the social roles it defines, codifies and reinforces (Faigley 88). Firth was prescient not only in his linguistic theories concerning a social view of language, but also particularly in his conflation of language and identity. Firth’s students, among them renowned mid-century linguist Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, continued to develop social theories of language which ultimately culminated in advancing the concept of “registers,” or the ways in which people actually use language in particular contexts and situations (Faigley 89). Linguists and scholars of English were gradually beginning to appreciate the limits imposed by strictly prescriptive uses of
language that in turn, opened the door to a rhetorical view of language that values audience and context.

Another example of the social and scientific views of language advocated by structural linguistics is exemplified in a 1937 *English Journal* essay, “American Youth and Their Language,” authored by Walter Barnes. In the essay, Barnes offers a similar perspective on the value of the descriptive practices of structural linguistics in English pedagogy, stating, “Language is primarily a mode of social conduct, a type of group behavior . . . Learning and using language as social behavior demands social intelligence and social thinking rather than linguistic ability and verbal and logical power” (Barnes 285). Barnes herein expresses a growing appreciation for a rhetorical context that values the role of audience in the communicative process. Barnes argues: “I grant that language education involves education in linguistics. But effective language is in large part . . . adaptation to persons; to time, place, and circumstances” (286). In 1937, Barnes mentions a rhetorical approach to communication that Lloyd Bitzer identifies as “the rhetorical situation” three decades later (5).

Until the 1939 arrival of NCTE’s *College English*, which addressed college-level issues in composition and literature, NCTE’s *English Journal* covered topics of interest to secondary and post-secondary teachers of English since 1912 (Connors “Journals” 349). The conversation regarding the drift away from prescriptivism in composition instruction continued in the 1939 inaugural publication of *College English* with Fred A. Dudley’s insistence on a turn from the privileging of rigid rules in freshman composition courses. He writes in his essay “The Success of Freshman English”: 
In composition, . . . the emphasis is upon clearness, effectiveness, smoothness, genuineness, and variety rather than upon rules. There is little either of expatiating upon the subjunctive and upon ‘shall’ and ‘will,’ or of battling the live forces of current usage, or of that parading of ‘Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis’ which somebody has called ‘herding the sacred cows of rhetoric.’ (24)

Dudley’s mention of the “sacred” triad of unity, coherence, and emphasis refers to what Connors terms “static abstractions,” or the formulaic approach to writing often referred to as current-traditional rhetoric (Composition Rhetoric 248). It is most often identified with the five-paragraph theme and has its roots in the nineteenth-century rhetorical texts of Alexander Bain and George Campbell (Composition Rhetoric 248). Bain and Campbell’s influential eighteenth-century rhetorical texts emphasized pedagogical practices that are commonly associated with prescriptivism, and they continued to inform composition instruction well into the twentieth century (Composition Rhetoric 83).

In another 1939 issue of College English, W. Alan Grove gives twenty-first century readers insight into the aspirations of a composition instructor working under the burden of prescriptivist praxis. Grove writes:

One reaction is that the instructor, discovering improvement of the student to be slow and the task of realizing it to involve slavish attention to detail, resigns himself to his composition sections and plans an eventual transfer of his main interest and counsel to the students who have somehow met the composition requirement and graduated to literature courses, where mastery of the comma fault, the dangling participle, and the paragraph is assumed, and where the beauties of language are discussed and enjoyed
by instructor and class, not dissected and imitated. (“Freshman Composition: Its Great Middle Class” 228)

Of the difficulties of reliance upon the drudgery of drill and skill exercises, Grove continues: “However, no mortal survives unscarred one hour of unalleviated grammar, especially a student who, finding the subject difficult, carefully follows through an explanation until, sooner or later, restlessness manifests itself, gradually spreading over the entire classroom” (236). Echoing Grove’s summation of the futility embodied in prescriptivism, Samuel Middlebrook, in his 1947 *College English* essay, “English I in Cellophane,” writes of the gradual turn away from the five paragraph theme prevalent in freshman composition pedagogy, stating: “Composing ‘themes’ taught confused college students to write with clarity, force, and elegance. The catalogue said so; and in those days, we believed what we saw in print” (140). Middlebrook, remarking that theme writing “stank,” lauds his University of Denver’s banishment of the freshman theme in favor of “writing papers of particular length for a given purpose and audience” (140). Middlebrook’s comments heralding the exchange of prescriptive-based themes for writing informed by the consideration of audience is a signal of the continual shift away from the confines of prescriptivism.

Professional associations such as NCTE and Modern Language Association (MLA) existed to advance conversations regarding the discipline through publications such as *English Journal* and *College English*. While *College English* focused upon college-level issues of composition and literature, *English Journal* devoted itself only to secondary issues after *College English* was first published in 1939 (Connors, “Journals” 349). As interest in communication studies increased during the 1940s, the need for a
publication concentrating on “communications courses and the teaching of written expression” resulted in the 1949 birth of College Composition and Communication. Through the platform of professional journals and associations, the concerns of a discipline in flux come alive for contemporary compositionists looking back upon the discipline’s history.

James Berlin argues that current-traditionalists “feared relativism in language introduced by the new linguistics and preferred the security of traditional grammar” (Rhetoric 137). A.M. Tibbetts, a mid-century compositionist, writes of his apprehension at mixing linguistic elements with composition instruction, insisting: “many of us have discovered that linguistics is a dangerous medicine, a nostrum whose properties are as unstable as chlorine” (280). Tibbetts as well as Paul Roberts were averse to the intrusion of linguistic science upon composition instruction, noting “a pall of scientism hangs over our sweet tongue” (Tibbetts 281). Roberts, author of 1956’s Patterns of English echoes the fears of current-traditionalists when he writes: “When I came in touch with linguistic science, I reacted against it and wished to defend the tradition” (60). However, unlike Tibbetts, Roberts pivots from his earlier stance, stating, “I found myself giving ground . . . until I was forced to the realization that the picture of the language I was giving my students was false” (60). Roberts, greatly influenced by Fries, recognized the value of linguistics in composition instruction and subsequently developed a text to serve as “a bridge between structural linguists and the traditionally trained high school teacher of English” (White 46). Roberts’s intent was to introduce teachers of secondary school English to principles of structural linguistics to help them cultivate awareness and appreciation for the value linguistic science could lend to composition instruction.
The shift from a strictly prescriptivist pedagogical focus on what was deemed “correct” did not take into account cultural influences that informed America’s evolving vernacular. Perhaps most alarming for prescriptivists was emerging linguistic research indicating that “many of the proscribed usages [teachers] had been warning their students to avoid could regularly be found in the speech of educated persons” (Crowley 482). In other words, educators themselves became complicit in the changing dynamics sweeping the English language further way from formalistic speech. Sharon Crowley argues that pedants occasionally indulged in casual speech in an attempt to consciously avoid accusations of “linguistic snobbery”—something that was decidedly averse to democratic ideals of egalitarianism (482).

**Cultural Influences and Composition Instruction**

The period of the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties were years in which the nation’s college English departments experienced measured shifts in the teaching of discourse. As the history of composition studies frequently attests, pedagogical changes are often influenced by changes in American culture. According to James Kinneavy, “Courses in semantics (often in English departments) spread throughout many colleges and universities” (*A Theory* 14). During the nineteen-forties, English departments increasingly moved “away from the creative and literary compositions of the expressionistic era to ‘workday’ prose” as semantic and communication theory supplanted the movement toward expressionism (*A Theory* 14). Expressionism, largely associated with self-expressive or personal prose, was, according to John Warnock, the “province only of those whose power and privilege gave them the leisure and means for such pursuits” (251). The cultural influences of World War II and the utilitarian spirit that
accompanied it made expressionism incompatible with the aims of writing instruction during wartime. Warnock compares nineteen-forties era expressionism to “the frivolity of the grasshopper who plays the fiddle while the ant toils to accumulate goods against the coming winter” (251). Consequently, the Conference on College Composition and Communication was founded in 1949 with the goal of investing students with a more pragmatic communications approach that “attempted to become equivalent in status to the composition course” (Kinneavy 15). Concomitant with the “almost total demise” of the influence of Romantic and Deweyite representations of expressionism and a decreased emphasis on creative writing came the rise of the scientific ethos in education in general (Kinneavy 16). Kinneavy argues that the resultant “exile of literary media” in the nineteen-fifties made way for the rise of descriptive linguistics. It is within the context of this setting that a consideration of the ongoing battle between prescriptive and descriptive grammarians continues, and the tension between the practical and the ideal is expressed in contentious debates found in professional journals of the time period under study.

The turn toward an increased emphasis on communication in education was in direct response to the perceived importance of reinforcing democratic ideals inspired by wartime patriotism, and as James Berlin notes, threats to democracy from fascism (92). In addition, a greater emphasis was placed on equipping citizens with the ability to discerningly sift through propaganda in order to become well equipped for discourse in a rapidly changing, increasingly mechanized urban world—a world that was developing an increasing appetite for communication across cultures and continents. In that milieu, there was little room for pedagogy emphasizing expressionism. Instead, writing courses
were supplanted by “general semantics, modern linguistics, and the combination of ideas we now call ‘communication’” to accommodate the changing needs of the American student (Thoma 36).

Around 1950, strides in linguistics research led to a crossover in language instruction as insights regarding human communication were seen as beneficial in teaching writing. By 1952, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a report outlining the ways in which linguists understood the evolution of language, signaling the beginning of professional acceptance of linguistic application to the teaching of English. In December 1952, NCTE Workshop Number Five convened to discuss “the place of linguistics in the freshman course” (“The Place” 14). Professional dialogue regarding issues affecting teachers of English are reflected in the details of meeting reports such as Workshop Number Five and the on-going conversations in journals supporting the members of those organizations.

The report notes that the workshop attracted “more of the confirmed than the curious,” including linguistic scholars Harold B. Allen, Nelson Francis, Donald J. Lloyd, and Juanita Williamson—all of whom were of like mind regarding the role of linguistics in composition instruction (“The Place” 14). The NCTE report states that the workshop participants’ “almost unchallenging degree of unanimity” and “wide area of agreement” was advantageous in reaching consensus via “discussion of the solutions offered by modern linguistic study to practical problems of the classroom” (“The Place” 14). The decisions the group reached were generated by eight questions circulated and discussed among the participants and included agreement upon the need of every graduate and undergraduate program in English language studies to “include a course . . . from the
approach of descriptive English” (“The Place” 14). NCTE’s Workshop Number Five also advocated the use of descriptive texts such as C.C. Fries’s *American English Grammar* or *The Structure of English* to be deployed in the teaching of The Freshman English course as a way to lead students toward versatility with language (“The Place” 15). For example, the report states that one unnamed workshop participant “suggested that we deal with that abstraction called Standard English, not as a replacement for the student’s individual, indigenous dialects, but rather as an additional set of practices to ‘provide substitutes for greater social mobility’” (“The Place” 15). In this statement, the 1952 NCTE Workshop Number Five seemingly broke ground for the discussions leading ultimately to the SRTOL resolution of 1972.

In 1953, Donald J. Lloyd is published in one of the first volumes of the Conference of College Composition and Communication, then known as the “bulletin” (lower case “b”). Lloyd’s essay argues for the value of linguistic science in the teaching of composition. Lloyd maintains: “If we find anything which we have to change in the language of the student—and we do—we know that we are touching something that goes deep into his past and spreads wide into his personal life” (“An English Course” 42). Lloyd insisted that the pedagogical goal in the college writing classroom was not “the dislodg[ing] of one habit in favor of another, but to provide alternative choices for freer social mobility” (42).

Lloyd was one of the early scholars whose work presaged the linguistic turn through his recognition of an increasingly expansive view of discourse, and the significance of a student’s home language. Lloyd was a mid-century scholar who unabashedly advocated a move away from prescriptivism toward incorporating
linguistics research in college writing instruction using descriptivist pedagogy, or the turn toward linguistics in writing instruction.

At the core of the descriptivist/prescriptivist disagreement lies the foundational premise that typically accompanies a festering concern governing language use—the bubbling undercurrent of ideology which threatens an existing standard or telos. Disagreement over language usage is typically a manifestation of deeper anxieties attendant with a culture that is changing; language and rules governing language are symbols that the status quo may be threatened. For example, John Algeo maintains that grammar disputes are fundamentally contestations regarding epistemology, or “how we know the world” (496). Arguing that because grammar wars are philosophically based, they essentially engage disputes surrounding usage—that is, what is considered “correct or proper” (496). Algeo contends that because “word, reason, and order” are referents of the Greek word logos, arguments about words “may be arguments about the perception of order in society, or for that matter of the cosmos” (496). Therefore, due to the philosophical and ideological relationship of language to the communities of which it is a part, Algeo argues that language usage disputes have a degree of connectivity to issues of class and, as Juanita Williamson, the subject of Chapter Three later notes in her scholarship, race.

Grammar wars and usage disputes, Algeo asserts, are often linked with sociology, and specifically issues of social class because the sense of what is “genuine, correct, and proper” is ideologically informed (496). Similarly, Henry Hitchings observes in The Language Wars, "They [prescriptivists] see in its structures a model of how they would like society to be—organi[z]ed and orderly, governed by rules and a strict hierarchy"
Hitching’s book illustrates the intensity with which the disagreement persists—even into the twenty-first century. History provides the context through which to better understand the controversy. In addition to ideological imperatives, Henry Thoma insists there are other reasons for the persistence of prescriptivism. Thoma writes that the preference for prescriptive pedagogical practices over descriptive ones boils down to practicality, arguing “many who have taught prescriptive grammar believe that it is much easier for students to learn rules and follow clear alternatives that to steer among a number of subtle choices” (37). This argument accounts for the persistence of prescriptive pedagogical practices even today.

However, supported by the scientifically based structural approach to language, descriptivists gained a perceived edge in the debate over prescriptivist practices regarding approaches to language study. Increasingly, professional journals and conferences from 1949 through the mid 1960s became the locus of passionate discussions regarding opinions surrounding the merits of descriptive grammar versus prescriptivism. Those who held fast to prescriptivism viewed their descriptivist counterparts as “liberals” intent upon undermining the established authoritative directives of the English language itself. Descriptivists argued that prescriptivists’ conservative approach to writing and usage elided the opportunity to “improve student morale along with their writing” by acknowledging and building upon the student’s home language (Crowley 484). Likewise, W. Nelson Francis supported the connection between student motivation and valorization of her native tongue in his book, The Structure of American English. Francis writes:

The old notion persists . . . that the linguistic behavior of the great majority of native speakers is in some way degenerate and corrupt . . . The teacher should attempt to
establish in his students confidence in their already broad and comprehensive
knowledge of their native tongue, and should show them how this knowledge can be
used as firm foundation on which to build a finer, more delicate, and more precise
sense of style. (567)

Francis’s view that a student’s home language is vital as a building block for further
development of writing technique presaged the key element of student identity contained
in the SRTOL resolution which would come two decades later; the linguistic turn was
foundational in bringing awareness that identity and language are virtually inseparable in
modern contexts.

While grammar wars quietly persisted, the conversation regarding the benefits of
a linguistic approach continued among composition instructors and scholars. For
example, Donald Lloyd and Harry Warfel developed an important reason to implement a
its Cultural Setting*, Lloyd and Warfel propounded the novel idea of contrastive analysis
to help emerging writers recognize sentence patterns in speech to help native speakers of
English. Cultivating an awareness of unconscious speech patterns in one dialect to help
bring them under control when writing in standard English was a useful heuristic
(Crowley 488). Lloyd writes of the value of pattern recognition in writing instruction
when he states, “I think an understanding of the patterns of our language is essential in
reading and writing” (112). Lloyd’s investment in pattern recognition was borne of
techniques that he observed in foreign language laboratories and through the English
Language Institute at Ann Arbor and through The University of Michigan’s journal


*Language Learning*, a peer reviewed scholarly journal published for the Michigan’s Language Learning Research Club (Lloyd 112).

**The University of Michigan’s Wide-Ranging Rhetorical Influence**

Conversations within the profession grew increasingly clamorous regarding the merits of prescriptive grammar versus descriptive approaches to teaching writing that were influenced by linguists and the science behind their subject. Michigan’s renowned linguistics program advanced the movement toward a modern mid-century flowering of rhetoric in large part through the research, scholarship, and pertinent theories that its faculty developed and produced—theories that challenged long held pedagogies of writing instruction for most of the first half of the twentieth century; theories that would later support the ideals of SRTOL. However, as James Berlin notes, the influence of structural linguistics and the subsequent return of rhetoric are two contemporaneous developments that “ought not to be underestimated” (*Rhetoric* 115).

The University of Michigan’s first professor of rhetoric, Fred Newton Scott, became an enormous influence upon generations of University of Michigan scholars for his advocacy of the social dimension of writing and communication during the early part of the twentieth century. Scott, who, according to Goggin “developed the first graduate seminar in the teaching of writing,” held a theoretical position that conformed to rhetorical principles in that he viewed composition as a social act (70). Scott and his students—Sterling Andrus Leonard and Charles Carpenter Fries—also adopted Scott’s advocacy of descriptive approaches to writing instruction as much preferred over prescriptive methodologies that were primarily concerned with sentence-level grammar, as contrasted to more global contexts of situation and audience of student writing.
Leonard and Fries’s efforts were significant antecedents in the turn away from prescriptivism as a preferred means of writing instruction. However, their work additionally became important as rhetoric and composition took strides toward professionalization in the nineteen fifties and nineteen-sixties.

The return to rhetoric that was fostered in the early twentieth century with University of Michigan trained linguists Sterling Leonard and Charles Carpenter Fries continued to influence generations of composition teachers and scholars through the remainder of the twentieth century. Fries, in his revolutionary 1940 NCTE English Monograph 10, *American English Grammar: The Grammatical Structure of Present Day English with Especial Reference to Social Difference or Class Dialects*, was among the first to assert the importance of the rhetorical context of audience in communication. Fries maintained the relative impossibility of accurately judging usage outside its rhetorical context because situation, context, and audience are of primacy in the making of meaning. Martin Joos writes of the importance of Fries’s monograph, noting “its avowed aim is to provide a scientific foundation for a realistic program of English teaching in our schools” founded largely upon structures informed by descriptive linguistics (275). As early as the nineteen-twenties, Fries lauded the value of student exposure to the usage of educated persons, but decried drilling in “the abstract rules of grammar” as difficult if not impossible to transfer to practical communication (Winterowd 289). Apart from research that would come later in the century with the work of Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd Jones, George Hillocks, Jr. and advocates such as James Moffett and Peter Elbow, Fries understood the central problem of drill and skill exercises lay in their relative ineffectiveness in improving student writing.
In short, Fries was among the first to make strides away from current-traditional rhetoric and its reliance upon prescriptivism. Rhetoric, notes historian Goran Moberg, once confined to the domain of university speech departments, “is now appearing more and more within the realm of [post War War II] English composition, an academic sub-discipline that now is speeding along new currents, perhaps toward some adventurous rapids” (67). Richard Young argues that an appreciation for the social context of writing influenced by structural linguistics led to an increased focus on rhetoric in composition classrooms and rhetoric’s gradual departure from its primary association with university speech departments. Young writes, “In place of traditional ‘comp’ is a conception of rhetoric as a special kind of behavior—a linguistic activity carried on within a social context, and furthermore, an activity that makes meaning as well as transmits it” (“Recent Developments” 1). Young’s view echoes Fries’s earlier assertion that appropriateness, not “correctness” is the valid standard for language use, and that students should be encouraged to develop dexterity in their rhetorical choices of language and dialect, a theory that New Rhetoricians such as Young enthusiastically advocated. Burnham notes that, “one of the strongest strands of New Rhetoric is the social science connection evidenced in the origin of cognitive rhetoric influenced from the social science of linguistics” (461). The rising interest in epistemology and the Burkean perspective that language creates reality—as opposed to merely reflecting it—fueled the attack against the “rule-strangled linguistically misinformed practices of freshman English” (Burnham 261).

Moberg additionally argues that the epistemic view of rhetoric was the fruit of poststructuralist thought, which he maintains was instrumental in narrowing of the status
gap between literature and composition concentrations in English departments during the mid-century (67). Moberg asserts:

Chiefly, the impact of deconstruction and neopragmatism comes from the insistence that language is not a mere technology, but the very ocean in which humanity swims. This is an epistemological position which asserts that our use of language in what constructs society, that reality is not described in language—rather that there is no reality except as soaked in discourse.” (67)

Moberg’s perspective is an outflow of the descriptivist view of language as a means to discovery, or the rhetorical concept of invention. With the influence of structural linguistics, rhetoric came to be seen “as the tool that must be used to reach an approximation of truth upon which action can be based” in writing instruction (Francis 157). Moberg echoes James Berlin’s assertion of the value of epistemic rhetoric in meaning making when Berlin suggests, “epistemic rhetoric holds that language is the key to understanding the dialectical process in the rhetorical act. Knowledge does not exist apart from language” (Rhetoric and Reality 166). Berlin, himself a student and mentee of Richard Young, insists that “rhetoric [is] at the center of knowledge since it is in understanding the uses of language that we understand what an individual, group, or class holds to exist, to be good, and to be possible” (“Rhetoric Programs after World War II” 12). Rhetoric enabled compositionists to view writing instruction in another light: as a means by which human beings can not only define, but affect reality as contrasted with current-traditional rhetoric’s view of writing as an acquired skill akin to brick laying.

Warner Rice, former English Department Chair at the University of Michigan, was also a member of Scott’s rhetoric department. In addition to Rice, the University of
Michigan’s influence upon composition can be seen in the pioneering work on language by Peter Howard Fries, son of linguist Charles Carpenter Fries. Peter Fries was an instructor to Juanita Williamson during her linguistic training at the University of Michigan. In addition to the Frieses, the University of Michigan produced other stalwarts of rhetoric and composition: Gertrude Buck, Albert Kitzhaber, Richard Young, Juanita Williamson and Geneva Smitherman; all scholars who recognized the ideological implications of a persistent pedagogical focus on prescriptivist pedagogical practices.

However, perhaps the most influential University of Michigan scholar in the return to rhetoric is Richard Young. Young represents a focal point in the linguistic turn for three reasons. First, Young is credited by many with the modern revitalization of rhetoric in teaching composition; and secondly, for the enormous influence he wielded upon emerging scholars such as Geneva Smitherman and Juanita Williamson, both of whom were adherents of the importance of rhetoric in writing instruction. While Williamson and Smitherman would grow to have fundamental philosophical disagreements regarding language and dialect use in the years to come, each advocated for an appreciation and validation of the culture that their African American student brought with them into the college classroom and therefore presaged foundational elements of SRTOL resolution. Their views linking the value of linguistics in writing pedagogy were informed by their linguistic training at the University of Michigan and their divergent philosophies are discussed in depth in Chapter Three. Finally, Richard Young’s scholarly contributions are significant to the field of rhetoric and composition because his foresight helped to shape theory and pedagogical practices in modern college
writing classrooms. Richard Leo Enos writes in the “Forward” to *Inventing a Discipline: Rhetoric and Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Young*:

Richard Young’s vision was no less ambitious than to change the landscape of the field of English studies. Young’s effort was not merely to ‘reclaim’ rhetoric for English but to reconceptualize what rhetoric is and, in doing so, change forever our idea of what English is, does, and offers. (Goggin *Inventing* viii)

Just as early twentieth-century linguists such as Strauss and Saussure recognized the value of inter-disciplinarity, one of the ways Young reconceptualized rhetoric came from his efforts to “link the study of rhetoric with multiple disciplinary lenses from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities that encourage a variety of empirical, historical, hermeneutical, and theoretical approaches and in so doing, he anticipated the cross disciplinary work and blurring of boundaries that is becoming increasingly common in academia today” (Goggin “A Geneology” xviii). In addition to Young’s appreciation for working with other academic disciplines as a complement to his own scholarship, he advanced the concept of ideology-infused writing pedagogy through the lens of critical thinking, calling for scholars to seriously investigate “the assumptions that underlie established practices and habits about writing” (“Tracing” 164). James Berlin, a student of Young through his yearlong National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) seminar, was perhaps the most widely recognized scholar to heed Young’s call to interrogate the ideology-infused practice of writing instruction as discussed in Berlin’s seminal 1988 essay, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom.” Similar to Fred Newton Scott and his multi-generational pedagogical reach, so too is Richard Young’s sweeping influence. Young taught the giants of rhetoric scholars on whose shoulders the discipline
stands. Among them were Janice Lauer, Bruce Horner, and Lee Odell at The University of Michigan; Maureen Daly Goggin, Joseph Patraglia, Ann Blakeslee; Charles Bazerman, James Berlin, and Victor Vitanza at Young’s NEH seminars (Goggin, “A Geneology” xxi). In short, Young’s rhetorical theories continue to influence the discipline through scholars who are currently active in composition studies.

Richard Young was instrumental in contributing to a growing awareness of the role of ideology in the pedagogical practice of writing instruction. For example, Young calls educators to interrogate the “assumptions that underlie established practices and habits about writing” in “Tracing ‘Round the Frame: Thinking about Writing in Departments of English” (164). Young’s call came at a pivotal time in American history in which the changing demographics of students entering newly desegregated college writing classrooms caused tension regarding how best to teach students whose educational backgrounds varied widely due to the apartheid segregation to which they had been subjected.

In the early nineteen-seventies, the NCTE recognized the tendency of Americans to “categorize non-standard dialects as corrupt, inferior, or distorted forms of standard English” that perpetuated “prejudicial labeling of students” as the long civil rights movement resulted in a surge of non-white students populating the newly desegregated American schoolrooms and colleges (“Proceedings”). It is against the backdrop of a changing cultural milieu that the differing pedagogical theories of Juanita Williamson and Geneva Smitherman take shape along with ideas that would ultimately inform the SRTOL.
Conclusion

Linguistic scholars wielded an undeniable influence upon the teaching of college composition during the period between 1910 and 1957 and played a formidable role in reshaping and perhaps rescuing composition pedagogy from the drudgery of the formulaic five-paragraph theme. Through the science of linguistics, compositionists were gradually able to loosen the discipline from its reliance upon current-traditional rhetoric and its strict adherence to prescriptivist tenets that greatly limited the epistemic power of the English language. This broadened view of discourse introduced by linguistic researchers and scholars offered twentieth-century English professionals the opportunity to revision rhetoric as a means to further conceptualize discourse beyond a “skill” confirmed by details such as correct comma placement or absence of sentence fragments. A rhetorical approach to writing instruction, by contrast, allowed a shift in attitude, mirroring descriptivists’ view of dialogue as a reflection of the social dimension of communication. The production of writing in the college composition classroom became less similar to a skill such as carpentry than “the motor for engaging in social life . . . plac[ing] it among the highest forms of human endeavor: learning how to define reality and how to have one’s own effect on it at the same time” (Moberg 68).

As scholars of composition and rhetoric continued to embrace the social dimension of writing throughout the mid-twentieth century, colleges were inadvertently preparing for the cultural shift that was to come with the culmination of the long civil rights movement.
CHAPTER THREE
Juanita Williamson, a Voice for Change in Composition Pedagogy 1957-1968

Light and shadow have been cast across the historical terrain. In acknowledging areas of both light and shadow, we suggest that there is a clear and present need to pay more attention to the shadows and to how unnoticed dimensions of composition history might interact with officialized narratives to tell a reconfigured, more fully textured story than we now understand. (Jacqueline Jones Royster, Traces of a Stream 581)

Juanita Williamson was an important yet misunderstood scholar whose research was influential in understanding what contemporary linguists term African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Her primary work, which occurred in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, was undertaken during a time of great controversy in academic circles as educators and intellectuals argued about the definition of and place for what was then termed Black English in American classrooms. Williamson contended that there was no such thing as Black English, asserting instead in a 1971 landmark article in the NAACP’s Crisis magazine that “features used to identify Black English are neither black nor white, but American” (“A Look at Black English” 173). While linguistic scholars ranging from Roger Shuy, William Labov, Joey Dillard, and William Stewart to Geneva Smitherman contend Black English is derived from a permutation of a language (pidgin) of African-influenced languages, Williamson instead insisted that West African languages “bear little relationship to American Black speech” (“Little Known Facts” 86). Williamson’s research supported a decidedly radical contention by contrast; she was adamant that Black speech patterns are not resultant of African influence, but rather are the consequence of a language learned from colonists who came predominantly from South and Southwest England (“Little-Known Facts” 86). Williamson’s British Isle theory
maintains the disparity between American Black speech and white speech is erroneous; she asserts instead that English was learned from illiterate white overseers and plantation owners of British origin (McMillan and Montgomery 99). Examples of Williamson’s connections between British dialects and speech often attributed to African Americans occupy precious space in her eponymous archive, and her assertions are supported by Raven McDavid, Jr. and the American Dialect Atlas (Little-Known Facts” 86). Some examples of Williamson’s British Isle theory include pronunciation of “ask” as “ax”; a common feature of “Black English.” Williamson and Thompson write:

J. L. Dillard has noted the pronunciation ‘ax’ in stead of ‘ask’ as being characteristically Black. For illustration he cites ‘And I ax her, How you do, my mudder?’ However, as the OED attests, ‘ax, down to nearly 1650 [was] the regular literary form, and [it is] still used everywhere in middle and southern dialects, though supplanted in standard English by ask, originally the northern form.’ Examples of this usage are abundant. The OED cites several examples from Chaucer including ‘Now loyyeres axe I this question’ (Knight's Tale); and from Coverdale's Bible of 1535, including ‘Axe and it shalbe given you’ (Matt. 6:7) and ‘It is axed at the mouth of the wyse’ (Eccles. 21:17). Although ‘ax’ had disappeared from the written language of the 17th century, it remained in the vernacular of many Englishmen. (“Little Known Facts” 89)

While many of her colleagues in the linguistic community disagreed with her theories, Keith Gilyard identifies Williamson as a significant voice in twentieth-century composition studies for her pedagogical strategies that relied more upon contrastive

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analysis of dialectical structures than upon drill and skill exercises. In the cultivation of facility with dialect, Williamson desired to equip her LeMoyne Owen College students with language proficiency that they could employ at their discretion when situationally appropriate. Her views that language variances were cultural rather than racial largely contradicted the opinions of many of her academic peers who by the late 1960s consented to the prevailing trend of Black English. However, Williamson’s perspective on Black English helped to break the trail for the eventual acceptance of SRTOL, though perhaps not in a way she could ever have anticipated.

**Context for Williamson’s Work**

Complemented by a growing interest in rhetoric at mid-century, resistance to prescriptivist practices in composition pedagogy that began in the early part of the twentieth century continued to gain momentum toward the end of the nineteen-fifties. Benefited by linguistic science, scholars of composition gradually were propelled to a deeper appreciation of language as something profoundly more complex than that which is quantifiable by “the presence [or absence] of error” (Rose 341). This broadened understanding of language ultimately became foundational in the expansion of college composition instruction beyond a textbook driven subject described by rhetoric scholar David Fleming as a course “disparaged by its own professors, subordinate to the content areas, and unattached to a scholarly enterprise” to a discipline that by the end of the twentieth century graduated “hundreds of PhDs” with active research agendas (Fleming 27). The transition from composition as a mandatory college freshman course at the beginning of the twentieth century to a scholarly discipline legitimized by research-supported doctoral programs at the end of the century has been well documented in
excellent resources including John Brereton’s *The Origins of Composition Studies in American College 1875-1925*, James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges 1900-1985*, and Robert J. Connors’s *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory and Pedagogy*. Though a complete historicity of the discipline of composition studies is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to acknowledge how rhetoric and composition’s past informs its present. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the convergence of cultural tensions inherent with the social movements of the nineteen-sixties in order to better understand the pedagogical implications for writing instruction that relate particularly to African American composition theory and history. Because these discussions foreground alterations in writing instruction leading up to the College of Composition and Communication’s adoption of the Student’s Right to their Own Language Resolution (SRTOL), this chapter examines the work of Williamson and subsequent scholars who called upon linguistic research and language study to argue for more effective approaches to pedagogy—especially relative to African American students. The work of Williamson and other mid-century scholars noted herein are influential in the progression toward the acceptance of dialectal variance—a pivotal concept in the development of the SRTOL Resolution in the decades to come. While scholars debate SRTOL’s effectiveness, the SRTOL Resolution is nonetheless significant for its affirmation of the social and rhetorical contexts of language, and the professional distance it helped establish between notions of so called “correctness” rooted in prescriptive practices as discussed in the previous chapter.

The beginning point of this chapter is denoted by 1957, the year in which an essay authored by Williamson, an early advocate of linguistic descriptivism, was published.
Colloquialisms she used in her writing are true to the time period and are indicated herein by quotations. Though Williamson spoke at a plethora of professional conferences and wrote actively through the early nineteen-nineties, the year 1968 serves as the end point for this chapter with the historical significance of the Memphis murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.—an event that exposed racial tensions nationwide and compelled the nation to finally address the miasma of pervasive racial inequity that had been boiling under the surface for decades. To adequately appreciate Williamson’s contributions, it is important to contextualize the cultural surround with which she dealt, and the many challenges she faced as one of very few African American females in the field of linguistics during the late nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. Furthermore, Williamson’s polemics were antithetical to those trending in the field and at times, her standpoint appeared ironic. While many of her Black colleagues embraced Black English, Williamson’s staunch advocacy of the language of the status quo implied quiet acquiescence to the dominant culture instead of resistance, which she believed was gained through facility with “standard” English and rhetorical persuasion.

While I see Williamson as a significant figure in mid-century composition history, my estimate of her is quite likely solitary in scope. History will most likely recall Williamson as the courageous, dedicated college instructor that she was; a pedagogue whose belief in the transformative power of language was largely confined to the domain of so called “standard English” as discussed in detail later in this chapter. That her years of research and dedication to the English profession may have inadvertently led to the adoption of the NCTE’s Student’s Right to Their Own Language Resolution is perhaps the cruelest irony of all relative to the course of her working life, for she fervently
resisted the Resolution upon grounds that are chronicled later herein. Because her arguments and positions ran counter to the dominant disciplinary position that emerged during her career, Gilyard characterizes Williamson as conservative. However, I perceive a conservative label best suited to one who is reluctant to embrace change or innovation; Williamson was decidedly not averse to change or inventiveness. Although she embraced a traditional view of “standard” English as the language of wider communication (LWC) best suited for professional discourse she understood her students’ preference of their home language over “standard” English in certain contexts. Because she experienced racism first hand during the pursuit of her education and beyond, she believed that anything other than “standard” English would always be secondary and consequently inferior or “sub-standard” to the dominant dialect. Williamson’s years of linguistics training and research at the University of Michigan informed her position regarding effective writing instruction to minority students. While most of her colleagues moved eagerly to embrace the trend toward Black English, Williamson’s resistance to do so may have made her appear conservative by contrast.

To more fully understand Williamson’s contributions to the growing acceptance of linguistic plurality in college writing classrooms, a frame of reference is beneficial. At the dawn of the early nineteen-sixties, conversations regarding the merits of linguistic descriptivism, defined loosely as the study of how language is actually used—versus prescriptivism, or the study of how some believe language ought to be used—played out in professional associations for teachers of English. These conversations reflected the changing dynamic of American culture through papers presented at various conferences, essays within society publications, and exchanges—at times terse—in letters to journal
editors. Popular professional platforms such as the Conference of College Composition and Communication (CCCCs) and the Modern Language Association (MLA) were sites of lively discussions regarding the challenges of a rapidly changing environment of college composition pedagogy. At mid-century, American culture and college English departments were simultaneously undergoing a metamorphosis brought about by swift and dynamic societal change that in many ways complemented the growing resentment of the status quo. During the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, returning war veterans, first generation college students, and African American undergraduates new to recently desegregated colleges finally brought diversity to classrooms formerly populated by young adult, white males of privilege. Social issues ranging from Vietnam War resistance and the women’s movement to lunch counter sit-ins laid bare the animus festering within a society where sharp disparities among the population existed. Adding to the post World War II milieu was the specter of Russian technological advancement through the 1957 launch of Sputnik—the world’s first orbiting satellite—juxtaposed only two months later by failure of the United States’ own comparable satellite, the Vanguard I (“The Postwar Period”). Catalyzed by fear of being eclipsed by Soviet technological advancement, the U.S. took initiatives to improve education in American public schools, including an increased emphasis upon writing skills and communication.

At the middle point of the twentieth century, linguistics became increasingly important to writing teachers for two primary reasons. First, compositionists gradually

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5 An example of one such exchange is Donald J. Lloyd’s “Darkness is King: A Reply to Professor Knickerbocker.” *College Composition and Communication* 2.1 (1951): 1-12. See also Lloyd’s “An English Composition Course Built Around Linguistics.” *College Composition and Communication* 4 (1953): 40-43.
recognized the value of appropriating science in lending credence to a discipline that for
the majority of the twentieth century struggled with legitimacy for its lack of presence in
the academy beyond the required freshmen course of study (Fleming 27). Second,
linguistics’ continued influence upon college writing instruction allowed for an expansive
view of the social and political dimension of language study and the subsequent
implications for use in teaching writing—a particularly significant development as the
tumultuous decade of the 1960s neared.

Concurrent with profound cultural upheaval of the time period under study was
the simultaneous development of composition/rhetoric and linguistics, two academic
disciplines which sought to “reinvent themselves and stake intellectual claim to distinct
identities among the established disciplines of the academy” (Smitherman “Historical
Struggle” 351). Even as linguistics scholars sought to divorce the field from traditional
Latinate-based prescriptive practices centering on how language should be used with a
move toward studies of how language is used, a parallel development was happening
with English departments—a rising interest in the revival of rhetoric (Smitherman,
“CCCC’s Role” 351). Each discipline reflected a growing awareness of a need to evolve
with the culture, but for differing reasons. Linguistics scholars who adhered to structural
and transformational grammars (descriptivists) appreciated the evolving nature of a
language and looked forward to responding to change; rhetorical scholars, recognizing
the value of a well-crafted argument founded upon reason, reached backward to antiquity
to bolster the credibility of English composition pedagogy to make it useful in a
contemporary setting. The simultaneous rise of the influence of linguistics complemented
the renewed interest in rhetoric relative to the development of theories that informed
college writing instruction. Rhetoric, with its emphasis on the importance of audience, found an ally in linguistics, for as James Berlin writes, “Linguistics . . . [was] crucial in reminding teachers of the social basis of language and of the class structure on which it is based” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 135). These were precisely the elements that needed to be addressed in language studies even as profound societal shifts forced a reexamination of the ways in which effective writing instruction was taught.

The confluence of the changing demographic profile of students combined with heated discussions regarding the best pedagogical practices for serving them fueled annual conference presentations and the pages of the CCCC’s two major publications for college writing teachers, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE)’s *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*. However, until mid-century, African Americans were excluded from active participation in both MLA and NCTE.⁶ Writing in *Diverse Issues in Education*, Jamal Watson observes, “While the MLA is quick to point out that there was never an official policy to exclude Blacks from participating in one of the world’s largest academic organizations, they concede that for decades its membership was less than eager to embrace African Americans into their scholarly ranks” (“Fueled by Rejection” par. 4).

Although 1954’s Supreme Court decision striking down *Brown vs Board of Education* permitted desegregation of public schools and colleges and effectively ended the unconstitutionality of the “separate, but equal” farce, racial segregation enforced for nearly sixty years under 1896’s *Plessy vs Ferguson* was a reluctant adjustment for some,

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particularly in the American South. The hesitance to fully embrace desegregation was evident even among scholars of English—who, three years after the *Brown* decision, still refused to admit African American scholars into their ranks or onto the pages of their scholarly publications. However, the College Language Association (CLA), formed in 1937 by LeMoyne College English instructor Hugh Gloster, rose to fill the niche of Black scholars desiring to “address professional issues, ( . . . ) exchang[e] ideas, and promot[e] professional concerns” relating specifically to African American teachers and scholars of languages of the era (Perry 168). Initially established as a racially inclusive association, the CLA began as the Association of Teachers of Languages in Negro Colleges before dropping “Negro” from its title and becoming the College Language Association in 1949 to better reflect the CLA’s desire to embrace scholars of all races (Perry 169).

In response to the need to commiserate on issues surrounding education and the prohibition against publishing in the nation’s leading educational forums, the CLA elected to publish a scholarly journal in lieu of its informative *Bulletin* to advance discussion of issues facing white and Black educators in HBCU settings in 1957 (Perry 169). The organ was called the *CLA Journal*. White and Black teachers in African American colleges found communion and solidarity in the College Language Association and the *CLA Journal*, the only such professional nationwide forum available to African American educators for discussion on topics relating to the teaching of postsecondary writing and language instruction.

A frequent topic of discussion in the *CLA Journal* were issues addressing the under-preparedness of students marginalized through decades of substandard educational opportunities due to *Plessy v Ferguson*’s separate but equal mandate. Scholars of
linguistics including Donald J. Lloyd and Williamson recognized linguistics as a tool by which to bridge the gap between dialects of the home and the dialect of the status quo.

Writing in 1954, Lloyd asserts:

We say ‘he don’t’ and ‘ain't,’ not because we are stupid and stubborn, but because the people we live with and work with and play with—our closest friends—say them. We need not to exclude these forms from our speech, but to learn to use them in alternation with ‘doesn't’ and ‘isn't’ or ‘aren't’ with easy command in exactly the right circumstances. Then, they help us make friends wherever we go. Then, they enrich our speech; they do not impoverish it. (“Let’s Get Rid” 3)

Lloyd, along with Williamson, recognized the rhetorical value of audience in discourse, especially when referencing the language of the home. And Lloyd, like Williamson, decried coherence to the intractable rules of prescriptive grammar—making their views of linguistic relativism cutting edge for their day—and a far cry from conservatism.

**Cultural Influences Inform Instruction**

As discussed in the previous chapter, structural linguistics (also known as descriptive linguistics) became an ally of composition teachers such as Lloyd and Williamson who called for radical changes in the teaching of composition to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Descriptive practices gained favor among educators who faced a different student demographic in their college writing classrooms and found support through an alliance with linguistics for teaching students who were marginalized due to forced educational segregation. Writing in a 1951 *College Composition and Communication* journal, Lloyd states: “Emphasis on ‘correctness’ at the expense . . . of a fluid, knowledgeable command of our mother
tongue—is responsible for the incompetence of our students in handling their language, and for their embarrassment about their own rich, native regional dialects” (“Darkness” 12).

Lloyd refers to prescriptive pedagogy in the English course as “the educational heart of darkness” for its contribution to the view of composition as a stultifying, dreaded college requirement (“Darkness” 12). In his essay, Lloyd also hints at the importance of acknowledging, rather than impugning a student’s home language.

In addition to Juanita Williamson and Donald J. Lloyd, nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties-era linguistic scholars including James Sledd and Charles Hartung lent their voices in support of emerging issues over language rights based on their intellectual aversion to prescriptivism and the inherent hegemony it represented. In 1954’s “Doctrines of English Usage,” Hartung articulates five points of the “majority opinion of the Commission on English Curriculum of the NCTE” found in the text, *The English Language Art*, published in 1952 (56). Based on the concept that “correctness depends upon usage,” the Commission on English Curriculum foreshadowed the SRTOL resolution that would come twenty years later. The NCTE advocated the following position on language, as summarized in *The English Language Art* as follows:

The teaching of correctness in school and college courses must shift in emphasis from the laying down of negative rules to the development of positive insights. Instead of teaching rules for the avoidance of error, pupils must be taught to observe and understand the way in which their language operates today for the various needs of communication. (278-79)
With this statement, NCTE’s Commission on English Curriculum recognizes the benefits of shifting from a negatively oriented focus on error avoidance to a rhetorically informed focus centering on the role of audience.

Albert Kitzhaber lent his voice to the move away from prescriptivist practice in writing instruction. Kitzhaber, after considering the curricula of a representative sampling of American colleges pronounced in 1963: “Freshman English is now so confused, so clearly in need of radical and sweeping reforms, that college English departments can continue to ignore the situation only at their increasing peril” (“Themes” 26).

Compounding the issue of the debate between adherents of structural linguistics and their prescriptivist counterparts was the additional issue of the changing demographic of the college student. No longer the domain of the privileged few, the opportunity for a college education in the early 1960s opened up considerably for first generation students such as veterans returning to school on the GI Bill and African American college students previously segregated because of race. In addition, economist Charles Clotfelter notes the impact of women students who contributed to swelling college enrollments during the post-World War II years as the demand for skilled labor increased (“Patterns” 33).

During the late nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties, college students not categorized as “traditional” students, that is, those between the ages of 18 and 24 who were largely financially dependent upon their parents, greatly affected college enrollment. Thomas Brock of the National Center for Educational Research argues that the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 was “arguably the most important turning point” in changes in higher education because it made financial assistance widely available to the general population for the first time (111). The “turning point” Brock
references is brought to bear in statistical evidence gathered between 1959 and 1970. During this period, fall enrollments in four-year institutions jumped from 3.3 million to more than 8 million; however, students aged thirty-five and older were not counted until 1972 (Clotfelter 33).

It is also important to note the increase in African American students from 1955 to 1965 in public colleges and universities. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the percentage of non-white college enrollees in American public institutions of higher education increased from fifty-five and one-half percent in 1955 to seventy-six percent in 1965. By contrast, the percentage of white students in attendance in public institutions during that same time period increased only three percent for the same ten-year time period. Charles Clotfelter writes “Combined with the desegregation of the 1960s and 1970s, these enrollment trends have transformed the composition of most colleges and universities” (35). Free to pursue higher education beyond Historically Black Colleges and Universities thanks to Brown vs. Board, college writing teachers faced the challenge of teaching students from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities—perhaps for the very first time.

The CLA welcomed the desegregation of colleges as a harbinger of the long-anticipated arrival of recognition of full citizenship and acceptance of African Americans into all avenues of American society and accordingly, prepared to adapt to their changing organizational mission. In 1957, CLA President Billie Geter Thomas alerted the membership to the society’s transforming role, emphatically stating that 1957 is “a crucial period in the battle for integration” as African American students began

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registering for classes at public universities in the deep south following decades of exclusion ("Humanism" 3). Thomas writes of the frustration inherent in an educational system founded on institutional inequities. She states “. . . it has become quite obvious that the educational system in the United States functions at three levels: Northern, Southern, and Negro” ("Humanism” 4). Thomas, acknowledging that the CLA existed in part to develop and implement solutions to problems that affected language teachers in Black institutions, remained hopeful that “our particular problems” will cease to exist with the educational advancement of integration (3). The “particular problems” of which Thomas delicately spoke referred to the effect of decades of oppression, marginalization, and inadequate educational opportunities that African American students had long experienced—and a problem that writing teachers aspired to ameliorate. The divide between the educational standards of primarily white institutions versus non-white institutions is made excruciatingly clear in Thomas’s statement at the CLA Convention at Arkansas Agricultural Mechanical and Normal College in 1957. In view of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board* desegregation decision, Thomas calls upon CLA members to be prepared to “meet the same challenge as the American college,” effectively publically acceding to the dichotomy between education for Americans of color and their white counterparts.

It is within this cultural milieu that Juanita Williamson’s voice enters the scholarly conversation regarding linguistics and writing instruction. Williamson’s first published essay, "What Can We Do About It?: The Contribution of Linguistics to the Teaching of English" was among the first items in the inaugural issue of the CLA Journal, reflecting her rising importance in the field of linguistics and composition.
pedagogy. In her essay, Williamson asserts the value of linguistics in helping marginalized students recognize the structure and patterns of language to facilitate the acquisition of “standard” English. Williamson’s article was important for her advocacy of linguistics in composition instruction and her recognition that students typically struggle with writing not for a lack of intelligence, but because their instructor uses ineffective pedagogy.

The Linguistic Turn, Prescriptivism, and Current-Traditional Rhetoric

In combating the “particular problems” teachers such as CLA President Billie Geter Thomas referenced, Williamson became instrumental in utilizing her linguistic training to help four decades of collegians at LeMoyne Owen College develop greater facility with Standard Academic English (SAE) through her groundbreaking pedagogical theories. Williamson figures prominently in composition history for her early recognition that successful pedagogical strategies for teaching the dominant discourse involve bridging the home dialect with new linguistic skill acquisition. Her work was a precursor to the basic writing movement of the 1960s and 1970s for its recognition that culture is a constituent of writing instruction. Echoing Williamson’s findings of more than fifty years ago, for example, Arnetha Ball and Pamela Ellis write in 2008 of the value of incorporating “the linguistic resources [students] bring into the classroom so they can develop powerful discourses that allow them to become contributors of knowledge in their own communities and in the larger society” (511). Although the research and

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8 Standard Academic English (SAE) is a term used occasionally throughout this project to denote the language taught in American schools and primarily used in professional communication. SAE is, in the words of sociolinguist J. Fishman, considered the “language of wider communication” (LWC). See The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society Newbury House, 1972. Print. The terms Standard Academic English and LWC are used interchangeably throughout.
scholarship of Ball and Ellis primarily focuses on adolescent student writing, they nevertheless engage the complementary nature of linguistics to composition instruction. Similarly, Sharon Crowley describes the usefulness of the application of linguistic science to the teaching of writing three decades after Williamson’s 1957 CLA essay. In “Linguistics and Composition Instruction 1950-1980,” Crowley observes that “even the most hostile critics” of the mid-century turn to linguistics in college writing instruction cannot deny the benefit it accorded compositionists during a period of great change in American social history. Williamson and other advocates of the linguistic turn were pivotal in challenging instructors to invert traditional ways of teaching in favor of working with the language students brought with them to the classroom. Such a theoretical departure “emphatically rejected the claim . . . that instruction should present students with an ideal language” to which theirs must be made to conform (Crowley 501-2).

Williamson’s pedagogical theories came at a time when the American educational system faced the daunting challenges of a changing society—namely, the influx of African American students into formerly all-white classrooms. As integration began in earnest, differing instructional and societal philosophies competed for cultural and intellectual prominence. Williamson maintained that facility with LWC was a primary means by which equality could be attained. However, her innovative pedagogical theories based on her research and her study of linguistics, ran counter to the prevailing pedagogical theories of the time. The trend toward Black English followed shortly thereafter, and likely contributed to her historical overshadowing because she was possibly the most widely recognized Black female academic who refused to support it.
Williamson’s voice, which rang out vociferously for that which she believed, is all but silenced due in part to her historical positioning and context. During the course of her career, Williamson was caught between the twin vortices of the gradual detachment from prescriptivism in post-secondary composition instruction and the disputes regarding the merits of embracing Black English as a legitimate dialectal variety that should be recognized in the classroom. Consequently, I theorize that Williamson’s voice rang out in muted irony in the cacophony and has been nearly lost.

As history bears out, teachers such as Williamson often occupy front and center positions as disputes of who has access to education to the ideology that informs its instruction are fleshed out. Particularly during periods of societal upheaval, pedagogical agreement is a rarity—especially relative to issues regarding written and oral discourse in American classrooms. Such contestations juxtapose power relations and racially informed attitudes toward linguistic preferences. In the latter part of the twentieth century a major challenge to the status quo arose in composition studies with the widening recognition that African American English and so-called “standard” English have systematized patterns. Awareness of these patterns is useful in teaching emerging writers whose language of nurture is decidedly not academic English.

Kenneth Bruffee describes writing pedagogy as “an initiation process whereby teachers invite students into the academic discourse community” (qtd. in Turner 2). However, for many students of color, the invitation to produce writing in the model of the academic community is akin to the adaptation of another language—an ersatz invitation to join a community that disdains the communication skills they have cultivated since
birth. For such students, this approach may create a tension rooted in years of frustration with writing inadequacy. Mike Rose writes in *Lives on the Boundary*:

There is, rather, embarrassment and frustration and, not surprisingly, some anger in being reminded once again of long standing inadequacies. No wonder so many students finally attribute their difficulties to something inborn, organic . . . Given the troubling histories many of these students have, it’s miraculous that any of them can lift the shroud of hopelessness sufficiently to make deliverance from [remedial] classes possible. (31)

Gilyard notes that scholars such as Geneva Smitherman, Jim Haskins, Hugh Butts, and J. L. Dillard have maintained that the non-recognition of African American English (AAE)\(^9\) tenders an “implicit and explicit rejection of both Black children, and the culture that produced them” (*Voices of the Self* 9). Gilyard, John Rickford and other scholars note that AAE has consistently and frequently been associated with a marked lack of intelligence, a contention that has racial, ideological and hegemonic overtones. The academic agenda perpetuated the status quo through admission criteria and college-entrance exam test scores, which have traditionally been unfavorable to non-Caucasian students. Until the late nineteen-fifties, colleges were populated and trained to produce a new generation of pedagogues, who in turn, sustained the prevailing hegemony. This has historically played out in the English composition classroom through adherence to a current-traditional rhetoric program of writing instruction based largely upon prescriptivism, which took hold at the turn of the nineteenth century with the advent of

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\(^9\) AAE is the term I use to describe African American English. Other quoted sources use the interchangeable terms African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English Vernacular (BEV) or Negro English to describe the dialect spoken by many of African American heritage.
the modern American university. As the university model transitioned from serving the
privileged young men of America in their study of literature as the “true aim of culture”
to equipping ever increasing numbers of students for the working world, current-
traditional rhetoric evolved. Simply stated, current-traditional rhetoric is defined as the
rule driven, prescriptive approach to writing that valorizes form and correctness over
content. Crowley writes, “What matters in current-traditional rhetoric is form. Current-
traditional rhetoric pedagogy forces students to repeatedly display their use of
institutionally sanctioned form. Failure to master the sanctioned forms signals some sort
of character flaw such as laziness or inattention” (95).

This pointed focus at the building blocks of written language, words and
sentences, had the effect of bringing grammar and usage to the fore at the expense of
meaning-making. In other words, Crowley argues that the inordinate consideration of
words and sentences led to a primary emphasis upon usage and grammar, which in turn,
led to the “policing of character” (95). Pointing out that current-traditional rhetoric
textbooks “delineated thousands of possible errors in grammar and usage that could be
committed by a ‘careless or lazy’ writer,” such a pedagogical approach was tantamount to
overseeing cultural ethos (95). In this milieu, Crowley writes, “an inept choice of words
or a comma fault betrayed a student’s lack of association with the right people and
institutions; worse, it betrayed her failure to care about or to succeed at the bourgeois
project of self improvement” (95).

Current-traditional rhetoric has implications for the student who finds herself with
a tentative grasp of academic discourse, and subsequently, finds that she may be
relatively powerless in a society that valorizes literacy (in the peculiar way the status quo
defines the term). Literacy, using Deborah Brandt’s *Encyclopedia of Composition and Rhetoric* definition is useful in this context. Brandt writes “literacy is a term that now illuminates the ways that individual acts of writing are connected to larger cultural, historical, and social and political systems” (“Literacy” 392). At mid-century, the confluence of pressure for social change combined with a pervasive resistance to societal convention opened avenues for new ways of thinking and new ways of teaching. Beth Daniell expounds on the hegemonic overtones of literacy instruction, arguing that “what counts as literacy in a given time and place is determined by social, economic, and political factors rather than by some prior definition” such as that evinced by the current-traditional rhetoric paradigm (“Narratives of Literacy” 399). Daniell credits James Berlin’s influence in conflating writing instruction with power structures. Berlin proffers that “ideology is inscribed in language practices and enters all features of our existence” (479). Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in an English composition classroom of students whose predominant dialect is not valorized as “standard.” Traditional techniques for teaching LWC to minority students have failed because such techniques misdiagnose the linguistic situation. Rebecca Wheeler and Rachel Swords observe: “Teachers see children’s language as Standard English with mistakes” rather than seeing it for what it is—following the patterns of their home language variety (22). Thus, traditional models of language instruction often repress and even spurn the home language of many underrepresented minorities. Because these students typically under perform on standardized tests that favor LWC, the educational system ultimately fails to “do justice to the epistemic possibilities and the latent counter hegemonic power available in the varieties of English that wash through society every day” (Geertz 114). The asymmetry between
“what we believe or feel and what makes others do, that makes it possible to locate where we now are in the world, how it feels to be there, and where we might or might not want to go,” is, according to Clifford Geertz, at the heart of that to which writing teachers should aspire. The “reach of our minds, of what we can say and think, appreciate, and judge, the range of signs we can manage somehow to interpret, is what defines the intellectual, emotional, and moral space within which we live” (Geertz 113).

It is within the context of the divide between dialects considered either “standard” or “substandard” that the opportunity for socio-cultural justice is born. In “visioning what works, visioning what might work better—and taking the intellectual and emotional leaps of faith to make the difference” writing teachers take steps toward meeting students in the spaces open to them (Geertz 113).

In her adaptation of a linguistic perspective in the teaching of LWC to minority students, Williamson was a pioneer who became instrumental in creating space for socio-cultural justice through her pedagogy. Her linguistic training enabled her to discern that “skill and drill” exercises employed to rectify writing problems in the model of current-traditional rhetoric were ineffective in instructing linguistically diverse students. Research reveals that “students of color are disproportionately relegated to classrooms using drill exercises rather than interactive, meaningful approaches that require extended writing, reflection and critical thinking,” (Ball and Ellis 507) and it was exactly this dynamic she sought to avoid. Also mirroring Williamson’s early contention, Nancy Mavrogenes and Nikolaus Bezručzko write “drill and skill exercises, which often predominate in the instruction in classrooms that serve poor and culturally diverse students are not the best approach for improving the writing of students of color” (Ball
and Ellis 507). Williamson again without attribution from these contemporary scholars, long ago recognized that rote drills are ineffective in establishing linguistic fluency. Her innovative pedagogical approach, the linguistic turn, helped to modify the prescriptive approach to writing instruction featuring the “mandate of writing correctly” with the contrasting notion that writing and speaking are culturally informed. AAE, then, is not post-secondary education benefit from writing instruction that prepares them to alternate between discourses of their home discourse and the academy.

Gilyard notes W.E. B. Du Bois’s contention that success in college is largely dependent upon prior preparation. Du Bois, himself an advocate of teaching the Black experience in higher education, called for HBCUs “to make provision for researched-based ‘scientific teaching’ to adults” as early as 1946 (“The Future” 147). Gilyard, in his 1999 germinal College of Composition and Communication journal essay “African American Contributions to Composition Studies” notes the complementary nature of Carter G. Woodson’s advocacy of African American heritage in language study to DuBois’s educational philosophy. Woodson argues: “In the study of language in school pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise rather than directed to study the background of this language as a broken-down African tongue—in short to understand their own linguistic history” (19). Rather than lay aside their African heritage, Williamson, who was likely influenced by Woodson and Du Bois, took a decidedly different approach to language study that was in direct opposition to prescriptivist pedagogical practices based on current-traditional rhetoric.
**Williamson’s Pedagogy**

Gilyard notes that Williamson “deemed popular handbooks inadequate” for the students she taught at the small Memphis HBCU (“African American Contributions” 632). In her criticism of grammar drills as remediation for poor writing skills, Williamson argued that an inadequate understanding of the problems presented in teaching a student standard English is a reason many minority students have difficulty mastering writing—especially writing within the current-traditional rhetoric paradigm. Williamson writes in the 1957 *CLA Journal*:

> Our task, then is to help the student who wishes to rise to the level of a college student and graduate, to make a change from the sub-standard dialect of the language to a standard dialect. This involves not teaching him a set of rules and do’s and dont’s, but rather helping him to understand why we want him to change and what he must do to make the change. He must be given some knowledge of the structure of standard English and how this differs from the structure of the dialect he uses. He will then have the equipment necessary to make the change. For what we really attempt to do is to teach him a new set of linguistic habits. (24)

Williamson recognized that the linguistic turn is an approach to English composition instruction that relies on contrastive analysis of dialects to promote versatility with language. She realized that race and language could be used as weapons of prejudice, or as a means by which to exclude certain students from attaining educational advancement. Of course, history is replete with instances of conquest in which one dialect or language was subsumed by the victor’s. Therefore, the claim that one dialect is unacceptable is tantamount to one group’s assertion that it holds dominance
over another. Williamson, at a critical juncture in American history, brought awareness that the adherence to dominant discourse should be a choice, not a mandate; for dialect is, after all, a reflection of one’s personhood. Perhaps more important was the political assertion that informed her opinion: African Americans have just as much claim to LWC as anyone else. Williamson, a nationally recognized authority on linguistics, used her position at her HBCU to help other African American students lay claim to what was theirs by their American citizenship.

Typically, Williamson’s pedagogical methodology included writing as a heuristic. For example, her former student and colleague Juanita Bass recalled that Williamson taught a lesson on the proper use of the apostrophe by first lecturing on the subject for a portion of the class, then tasking her students with the job of composing ten sentences relating the use of the apostrophe. At the heart of her writing classes lay the question, “What are you trying to communicate, and what is the best way to do that?” (Bass interview). Though she firmly believed in standard articulation in speech, she thought it a matter of style that could be attained through practice. The construction of sentences, according to Bass, took precedence over matters of style, for she believed style too would come with time and practice.

**Williamson Resists Prescriptivism and Black English**

The pursuit of full African American selfhood, embodied in the praxis of the HBCU, was evident in the pedagogy and scholarship of Juanita Williamson. Although her scholarship began in 1957, she continued to write and teach at LeMoyne Owen College for forty years, retiring only because of failing health shortly before her death in 1993. During this time period, Williamson resisted the tendency to ascribe racial features
to language on the basis that ownership of the language of America is also the language of African Americans. In 1982, she noted that “standard” English and white English were considered synonymous terms: “Almost none of the recent studies done by sociolinguists of ‘Black English’ are really comparative studies of black and white speech. The assumption in them is that the white speakers speak Standard English [...] and black speakers speak something else” (“Little Known Facts” 86). Her life experiences had taught her that any dialect by any name would always be subordinate to LWC, and she was unwilling to concede the language she believed was hers by birthright. Williamson saw facility with language as a means by which underrepresented minorities could earn equal footing through discourse.

Gilyard notes that Williamson’s “voice was important at a time when deficiency and skill and drill proponents were widely operative in the field” (“African American Contributions” 633). Although she described AAE as a “substandard” dialect, Gilyard writes, “she clearly regarded the dialect of blacks to be rule governed and systematic (“African American Contributions” 633). Juanita Bass, a former LeMoyne-Owen student and colleague of Williamson’s, explains that in the late 1950s, linguists sometimes used the descriptor “substandard” in lieu of the term “illiterate” to describe the speech of the uneducated (Bass interview). Bass insists that Williamson objected to the term “illiterate” which was then commonly used in linguistic circles as labels to “identify spoken and written language levels according to formal, colloquial, or illiterate” (Bass interview). To further explain Williamson’s use of the term “substandard,” Williamson herself notes that researchers and scholars in the 1960s commonly denoted references to Black English as “non-standard” because at that time, “few recent studies of any other non-standard
English have been undertaken” (“Black English” 4). Williamson likely used the terms non-standard and substandard interchangeably to differentiate academic discourse from non-academic discourse with no intent to denigrate the dialect of most of the students with whom she had contact. Clearly, Williamson preferred the term “non-standard” to adjectives then widely used to describe African American dialects. She writes in an unpublished paper circa 1985: “The structures of Black English are often described as ‘peculiar’ and ‘deviant.’ Both words carry a connotation of less good . . .” (“Black English” 6). She goes on to denounce the use of the adjective “deviant” as a descriptor of Black speech for its connotation that “what is normal is white speech and what is non-normal is the speech of Blacks” (“Black English” 6).

Throughout her long career, Williamson’s LeMoyone-Owen colleagues Juanita Bass and Charles Moore attest to her tireless efforts to change perceptions associated with non-prestige dialects. Nearly fifty years after the inaugural issue of the CLA Journal, Ball and Lardner assert: “A journey toward unleashing the literacies of AAVE in writing and composition classrooms begins with seeing with new eyes” (16). Williamson’s training as a linguist enabled her to “see with new eyes” that “understanding the syntactic structure of the language can help us with the ‘grammar problem’” (“What Can We Do About It” 26). She argues, “The student can be made to see that grammar is more than a collection of rules. Once he understands the patterns of English, he is well on his way to solving the problem intelligently” (“What Can We Do About It” 26). Williamson identified three devices of importance in most grammatical relationships: word order, change in form or inflection, and word function. Noting that Southern dialects frequently elide the change in verb form, she observed, “Telling a student it is wrong [to use a
phrase such as ‘he go’ does not help; he has been able to communicate up to this point, so why change?” (“What Can We Do About It” 26). She astutely points out that if you offer an understanding of “the signaling devices” inherent in the structure of English language, the student will develop an affinity [for] “grasp[ing] the meaning of what he reads” (“What Can We Do About It” 26).

Though she made substantial contributions to education, linguistics, and as noted by Gilyard, composition studies, Williamson’s historical overshadowing may be attributed in large part to her resistance to Black English and its identification with race. In a critical analysis of the reception of Williamson’s book, *A Various Language*, her published essays and interviews with colleagues, three observations emerge: there are scholars who agree with her, scholars who disagree with her, and scholars who advance that her work deserves fuller credit for her contribution to linguistics and composition theory. Yet because she persisted in advancing an argument with which a consensus of linguists of her era disagreed, her scholarship was eclipsed by more compelling academic trends of the time. While her position on AAE may appear to contradict her devotion to her people, just the opposite is the case. Williamson’s academic stance on the controversial issues of her time were informed by her deep devotion to African Americans, by the political dimensions of race relations of the period, and by her understanding of the role of language in attaining equality.

**What is Black English?**

Black English, as defined in a book by that title by J. L. Dillard in 1972, is “the language spoken by eighty-percent of Americans of African ancestry [which] differs from other varieties of American English” (Dillard ix). Geneva Smitherman describes
Black English as “a language mixture, adapted to the conditions of slavery and discrimination, a combination of language and style interwoven with and inextricable from Afro American culture” (Talkin and Testifyin 3). Though Black English has a wide variety of features\textsuperscript{10} including copula dropping (“they angry” instead of “they are angry”) and habitual be (“we be walking” instead of “we are walking”) it is important to understand that features such as these occur systematically, as with other recognized languages. It is also important to recognize that Black English can convey entirely different meaning from that of “standard” English as illustrated by a study involving Sesame Street characters Elmo and Cookie Monster. After showing children drawings of Elmo eating cookies with Cookie Monster looking on, both Black and white children agreed that Elmo was consuming cookies, but the Black children stated that Elmo be eating cookies. This experiment, conducted by graduate student Janice Jackson in 2005, illustrates how the habitual be characteristic of Black English communicates a state of perpetual action as opposed to a condition of the present in “standard” English. This example underscores the importance of instructors to recognize the potential for misunderstandings based on an unfamiliarity with this aspect of Black dialect.

Mid-century linguists including Louise DeVere, William Labov, and William Stewart maintain that Black English is an organized, systematic language with its own grammar—and is not merely a substandard dialect. DeVere argues in her essay, “Black

English: Problematic but Systematic,” of the necessity of “keep[ing] in mind that Black English is a logical, coherent language system” (39). Similarly, William Labov asserts that “it [Black English] differs from other dialects in a regular and rule-governed way, so that it has equivalent ways of expressing the same logical content” (“The Logic” 7).

Asserting the systematic nature of Black English, Stewart writes that AAVE is a "language system which, though it may differ from standard English in form and sometimes even in function, is nevertheless logical, coherent and . . . grammatical” (as quoted in DeVere 39). Black English, according to DeVere, Labov, and Stewart, is rule driven and systematic, but is different from other languages in its stigmatization. Far from being an imperfect version of “standard” English, Black English displays complexity in grammar, tense, and aspect that is absent in the dialect of the status quo. For example, John McWhorter writes of the dismissive pronoun “ass” as a word that defies the boundaries of its counterpart in “standard” English. Rather than viewing “ass” as a profanity, Black English uses “ass” as a suffix for the counterintuitive as in “Man, that was a long-ass movie” (Waldman). Defining grammar as “how words are put together,” McWhorter notes that Black English grammar is more distinctive than “standard” English in its dexterity. The creation of a new suffix, “ass” is an example of “the creation of a new kind of grammar that mocks the counterintuitive” and signals that the movie was longer than expected (McWhorter as qtd. in Waldman).

The idea of Black English’s use of the counterintuitive is enhanced by Smitherman’s perspective of the history of Black English. She writes that African American English was a “counter language, a bond of solidarity between Africans from different ethnic groups” born of the hardship of enslavement (“African American
English” 6). Smitherman writes: “It was, in fact, a very conscious attempt on the part of those in enslavement to represent an alternative or a different reality through language—through a language which is based a lot on irony, on ambiguity, on what Henry Lewis Gates calls “double-voicedness” (“African American English” 6). Smitherman describes the three dimensions of African American English: a system of grammar and pronunciation, verbal traditions, and a system of semantics (“African American English” 6). If someone says, “The brother be looking good,” Smitherman explains that just like Cookie Monster and his cookies, there is a reoccurring state of looking good, or eating cookies as it were. Smitherman notes that many West African languages share this grammatical pattern.

Regarding pronunciation, Smitherman describes the post-vocalic R deletion as a common feature of Black English. A word such as “four” is pronounced “fo”; “more” is pronounced “mo” and so on. Smitherman relates that the post-vocalic R deletion, like habitual be grammatical pattern, are remnants of African languages. Verbal traditions such as “playing the dozens”—a ritual involving verbal one-upsmanship using funny, hyperbolic insults—is one such verbal tradition. Playing the dozens is just play, “until you say something literally about a person, then it ain’t play anymore” (“African American English” 11). The third dimension of Black English Smitherman notes is semantics, which refers to the words or phrases that embody the Black experience and are shared cross generationally. Smitherman uses “Miss Ann,” as a derogatory term for a white woman trace to the eighteenth century. Williamson utilized the term in her description of a Black cook working for “Miss Ann” to underscore the ideology that attends language use.
While the aforementioned examples of Smitherman’s triad of grammar/punctuation, verbal tradition, and semantics only scratch the surface of the range and affect of Black dialect, these dimensions represent the deep complexity of a language that embodies a nexus of cultural, historical, and poetic significance that is unrivaled in American history due to its context relative to the stain of human slavery.

Both SRTOL Resolution and the 1979 Ann Arbor, Michigan case acknowledged the role of a student’s home language in achieving academic success, yet each was informed by an understanding of language and literacy with which Williamson fundamentally disagreed, and her convictions regarding the danger of conflating race and language challenged the foundational orthodoxies of those germinal events.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, because her arguments and positions ran counter to the dominant disciplinary position that emerged during her career, Gilyard characterizes Williamson as conservative. Gilyard’s conservative label suggests willingness for conformity, but Williamson was by no means a conformist. Rather, Williamson was acutely aware of the dynamics of race and politics in ways that her critics did not appreciate, and she called upon her research and scholarship to advance a pedagogical agenda of empowerment through the teaching of English. Her resistance to the Black English movement was informed not by conservatism but by her experiences that separate most often meant unequal. Williamson’s personal experiences with racism informed her mission for African American equality, not via separation, but through the claim that LWC is the egalitarian language of educated Americans of any race. Williamson’s research supported her theory that linguistic variations were not racial in
origin but attributable to geographical and regional influences, a view that was an anathema to those reluctant to let go of long held ideas of racial supremacy.

Williamson was passionate about her student’s cultivation of literacy because she understood literacy as a vehicle for empowerment and uplift. Literacy, as defined by Jacqueline Jones Royster, is “a socio-cognitive ability . . . to gain access to information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems, sometimes complex problems, over time” (Traces of a Stream 45). Williamson endeavored to equip her students socially and politically through the power of literacy, which she defined as “one’s ability to read with understanding, to write acceptably, and to speak to be understood” (“Speaking Out” 148). Williamson states that all forms of literacy, from cultural literacy to computer literacy, are offshoots of basic literacy. She posits that comprehension takes place only in the context of conscious or subconscious structural awareness of “how structure shapes the presentation of ideas and how the ideas to some degree dictate grammatical structure” (148). It was her opinion that interpretation was a function of the relationship between structure and meaning, and “syntactic structure gives meaning to the words and shapes ideas” (148). By contrast to Williamson and Royster, James Gee defines literacy as “control of secondary uses of language” (“What is Literacy” 23). Gee’s definition notes that our language of nurture is the one means of communication that we learn “for free,” in that it is acquired naturally apart from the struggle of acquiring mastery of another language (22). Each of these definitions of literacy serve to underscore the socio-cultural dimensions of language, and the important role of writing instruction in cultivating a lifelong skill of negotiating differences in the world.
Williamson’s unique approach to writing instruction empowered AAE speakers by providing a bridge across the chasm between their dialect and “standard” English. The bridge? Awareness of patterns in language and speech that allowed versatility between dialects. Williamson’s efforts to validate and then add to her students’ linguistic competence initiated a change of attitude still pertinent for college classrooms. For example, Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner write some four decades after Williamson’s foundational *CLA* essay:

We propose that most teachers need, first, to examine their attitudes toward non-standard language, and the unspoken, sometimes unconscious, prejudices they possess to some degree as products of the racially divided society in which we participate. Recognizing a need to make the link between AAVE speaking students, critical race theory, and their own success will help teachers to begin the journey toward changed attitudes. That journey will begin as writing teachers come to analyze their own knowledge of and practice in dealing with AAE-speaking students through the lens of their own sense of efficacy and reflective optimism. (*African American Literacies Unleashed* 16)

Though they never cite Williamson, Ball and Lardner note that previous research indicates that prevalent attitudes toward AAE have been singled out as an academic barrier for African American students. They write that AAE, as a feature of power structures within society, are often reflected in the classroom: “Such talk disrupts a cultural narrative of color-blind schooling with literacy as the means to socioeconomic mobility” (*African American Literacies Unleashed* 2). Ball and Lardner share similar pedagogical philosophies with Williamson, such as “their belief in writing as a tool for
personal and professional change, and their commitment to belief in writing as a vehicle for societal transformation” as did Williamson (African American Literacies Unleashed 1). Williamson viewed academic discourse as the means through which dialogue could be initiated and sustained in resisting racism. In clarifying their definition of AAE, Ball and Lardner use Smitherman’s definition found in Talkin and Testifyin to refer to “the totality of the Africanized form of American English, the language system used at some time to some degree by most African Americans today” (African American Literacies Unleashed 31).

Recognizing the importance of sharing her research with fellow educators, Williamson exhibited her engaging teaching style at a conference near the end of her career. In a paper recovered from the Williamson archives, a white professor named Dr. J. F. Butler of Vanderbilt University describes a teaching demonstration by Williamson, whom he describes as “a Black woman from Memphis” (“Idea One” 4). Butler describes her teaching demonstration as “the highlight of the summer for all of us by showing what could be done in a classroom with 50 Black Upward Bound students” (“Idea One” 4). Butler relates how Williamson, during a two-hour training session in which she emphasized enunciation, diction, and responding in complete sentences, modeled the desired linguistic behavior she sought to teach students: Butler recalls:

The effect of this exchange was astounding. My colleague [Williamson] did not say another word on the subject of speaking in complete sentences, did not point out to the group what the [student] answerer had done and did not praise him further . . . yet apparently every student in the group got the point, for in the rest of the two hour session, every student who answered a question did so according to conventions of
standard English. I have taught many college seniors and PhD candidates who annoyed me because they couldn’t do that. (“Idea One” 4)

For the duration of the training session, Williamson repeatedly demonstrated how to inculcate conventions of LWC to give these young men and women the ability to move between dialects if and when circumstance dictated. Butler concludes his essay with a reflection of her pedagogy:

I think what impressed me most about the learning I saw taking place in these two hours was the transformation of the students’ view of themselves: as they read the words of the poem articulately, and with power and confidence, they themselves became different people: people who were in command, people who knew they were good, people who felt in themselves power. (“Idea One” 4)

Butler’s comments offer a snapshot into the mindset prevalent in the era in which Williamson toiled. Butler, as a white man observing Williamson leading her fifty Black students through a conservative, prescriptive pedagogical exercise, is thoroughly impressed with her efforts; likely because Butler himself saw merit in the prescriptive pedagogy she demonstrated. Butler’s terminology offers insight into a professor who appears to valorize belletristic notions of taste. Noting her race and her hometown, as “a Black woman from Memphis” (“Idea One” 4), Butler implicitly sets up a contrast between Williamson and himself, a white professor from Vanderbilt. His description implies she is merely a Black, female teacher from Memphis, and neglects to mention that Williamson, like him, also has an earned doctorate. Butler goes on to describe the utter “transformation” that he witnessed as the Black students spoke in complete sentences and “became different people: people who were in command, people who
knew they were good, people who felt in themselves power” (“Idea One” 4). It seems as if Williamson’s teaching demonstration was most powerful in convincing Butler that her students were more than just Black kids from the ghettos of Memphis; they suddenly became “good” in his eyes because they left their home language at the door of the vaunted venue at which Butler sat. Perhaps garnering the respect of white peers during the exercise was her intention.

In another snapshot of Williamson’s creative pedagogy, she clandestinely introduced the “forbidden” Zora Neal Hurston to her students. As Chair of the English Department at LeMoyne-Owen College, Williamson worked in an exceedingly conservative environment. Historically, HBCU presidents were white men. When the college governing board finally appointed an African-American president, Williamson found his views to be even more circumspect as he succumbed to the dictates of the white governing board. This constraint forced her to employ creative teaching techniques to achieve her teaching goals. Because political and pedagogical mandates forbade Williamson from teaching contemporary African American authors such as Zora Neal Hurston in her English classes, she circumvented that political paradigm by facilitating a discussion upon how an “approved” [white] author might be viewed through the lens of a contemporary author’s attitude. In so doing, Williamson kept her own voice outside the conversation, thereby securing her professional safety while exposing her students to contemporary ideas. Through methods such as this, she deliberately carved out a small space of autonomy as she carefully tiptoed around conflict with politics in academe and even Memphis city leaders.
Beyond Williamson’s teaching demonstration, she often stressed the value that a command of “standard” English could confer. Ball and Ellis, writing in 2004 of their research, echo the notion of empowerment through writing: “This research was conducted with the thought in mind that students can and should be given numerous opportunities through the medium of writing to explore and negotiate who they are and who they have the possibility of becoming” (509). Ball and Ellis, like many modern scholars, reflect Williamson’s core principle that writing is a multi-pronged instrument capable of fostering self-discovery, economic advancement, respect, or, in various forms, of “becoming.” Like Williamson five decades prior, Ball and Ellis extol “the use of writing as a tool for teaching and learning,” citing both the opportunities and challenges for students to develop strong writing identities and to experience academic success (505). Although Ball and Ellis’s research is chiefly concerned with adolescent students, similarities in meeting the challenges of dialectal differences in students of varying ages are pertinent. Part of the challenge is aiding students in the mastery of grammar as the framework for proper communication, as opposed to strict emphasis on drill and skill exercises, which Williamson abhorred. An abstract in Williamson’s eponymous archive reveals her position on prescriptive grammar:

All too often grammar is taught as a sort of bag of discrete items, bits and pieces, which the educated person is expected to know. Such an approach gives little recognition that the syntactic element is “the jug” into which the “wine,” the semantic element is poured, both of which are enhanced by the flavor of rhetoric. (“For Want of a Nail” 1)
Williamson’s colleagues Bass and Moore, explain that she used the above referenced metaphor to explain the critical importance of standard conventions in writing. They explain she meant that as a student pours her ideas into the “jug,” the ideas remain formless without the container, or the structure of the English language. In promulgating student awareness that words function in relation to each other, she analyzed conventions of AAE with that of so-called “standard English” to enable students to see patterns within linguistic varieties.

Similarly, Charlotte Brooks writes in 1985: “Language is whatever stance a person takes and whatever sound he makes or transcribes that define him in his mind and in the minds of others. If a student stands, sits, walks, dresses, speaks, and writes in ways acceptable to the middle-class American, he has few problems in school” (16).

As an authority on Southern English, Williamson states: “I have found that there isn’t anything that they [white scholars] say is Black English that you don’t find whites using. It makes little difference to me whether they borrowed it from Blacks, or whether Blacks got it from the whites; that doesn’t matter because English is full of practically something from every language . . . If it has become English, it is English” (qtd. in Miller 291).

Although she never uses the term “African American English” in any of its various forms, she nonetheless defines the “language of the Negro community” as a dialect separate from that of other cultural communities as early as 1957. According to Redd and Webb, “Most linguists have classified AAE as a dialect since the 1960’s, when they began to document the rules that govern its pronunciation and grammar” (8). During the time of Williamson’s scholarship, the terms “formal and informal”—now commonly
used to differentiate LWC from AAE—were not widely utilized. Williamson used the terminology available to her in her published essays. The terms “formal” and “informal” do appear in her scholarship, but not until 1980.

Williamson embraced the concept of language registers to distinguish variations in language according to the user, taking into account factors such as social background, geography, sex, and age and in context of situational variances. The term “register” was brought into use in linguistic circles in the early sixties, as she was completing her doctorate at Michigan. Language registers refer to the level of formality used in speaking and are determined based upon the speaker’s audience. According to Bass, rather than use the term bi-dialectalism to indicate fluctuations in speech patterns, Williamson preferred to use terms associated with language registers. Bass said, “She was a strong advocate that if you were going to move up in the world, it was all about those registers.”

Williamson is perhaps best known for *A Various Language: Perspectives on American Dialects*, a collection of essays on the social and regional differences of English. The 1971 book, compiled and edited by Williamson and Virginia Burke, takes a regional view of dialectical differences that reflects the history of the American people as they settled the country. The contributors to *A Various Language* concur with Williamson that dialectal patterns are part of living in a culture influenced by the vernacular spoken by our forebears. It features essays on American dialectology by Raven McDavid Jr., E. Bagby Atwood, Lorenzo D. Turner and other prominent linguists of the time. One section of *A Various Language* is devoted to essays from various authors regarding literary

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11 For more information on registers, see Chapter Two.
representation of American English dialects. This was a favorite study hobby of Williamson. In her study of literature, she was fond of keeping note cards indicating linguistic features of whites often attributed to Blacks. She used references from *Pygmalion, Babbitt, The Grapes of Wrath*, and Memphis newspapers such as *The Commercial Appeal* and *Press Scimitar* to advance her argument that linguistic differences are geographical, not racial in origin. *A Various Language* is an often-cited source of scholars across disciplines ranging from linguistics and education to composition studies. Contained within the text is her essay “Selected Features of Speech: Black and White” in which she asserts that language patterns of African Americans typically contain some remnants of their collective Southern heritage—a linguistic heritage shared by white Southerners (507). Hans Kurath, a renowned linguist of the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, writes in the Introduction to *A Various Language*:

> A teacher who knows how his students talk in their homes . . . has some understanding of the way in which regional and social differences in our English came into being has obvious advantages. Knowing the socially marked differences between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ usage, . . . he will not waste his efforts on trying to replace the student’s native speech and instead, teach him a ‘second’ dialect that he can use to his advantage. (xiii)

Noted linguist James Sledd agreed with Williamson, stating, “Everything found in BVE [Black Vernacular English] could be found in Southern white speech”—a point which she emphasized on countless occasions (qtd. in Labov 177). Sledd challenged the concept of Black English in the late nineteen-sixties, charging, “the social stigma attached to the dialect is a manifestation of white racism” (DeVere 43). Sledd contended
that people who rarely talk together will talk differently and differences in speech tell much about a person, including the part of the country from which they come. From a contemporary perspective, John Baugh describes discrimination based on the sound of someone’s voice as “linguistic profiling.” Bass and Moore noted with fondness Williamson’s propensity to point out lapses in the formal speech of those who did not concur with her belief that Black and white speech have fundamental similarities. This was particularly so at conferences in which a speaker unwittingly used economy of language in the speech form “I’mo.” In a paper taken from the Williamson archive, she writes:

My files show that “I’mo” occurs in all the Southern states and in Ohio and California. A great many people who use “I’mo” have no idea that they do . . . A teacher at a conference in South Carolina was far from delighted to learn that she probably used “I’mo” after she turned to her friends (and a linguist seated there) and said, “Don’t leave me, I’mo go speak to Lucy (at another table) for a minute. Her friends looked at the linguist and giggled. I’mo is not non-standard. It is not Black. It is not white. It is American English with a Southern exposure. (“The Embedded Question” 56)

Williamson’s research as a linguist gave her a particular perspective about dialectical variations that others scholars did not necessarily share. She was deeply committed to African American education, but she took issue with many of the programs that were founded on what she believed to be incomplete understandings of language.

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Charlotte Brooks, author of several books on teaching African American students including *Tapping Potential: English and Language Art for the Black Learner*, agreed with Williamson. Brooks held that “the student reared in the inner city uses the language of his family and friends because that is what he hears, what he understands, and that is what he likes” (16). From this perspective, Brooks declares, “a student’s language of nurture is not only his identity, but is a source of joy, sensitivity and power” (16). Brooks writes that a student’s home dialect is not only a source of influence but a rhetorically effective strategy by which to “explain things she feels, to tease, or joke” while relating to others through the home discourse. Brooks, like Williamson, argues for the development of facility with “either their first language or another” rather than a home dialect that does not conform to conventions of Standard Academic English (16).

**Critical Reception of Williamson’s Scholarship**

Williamson’s scholarship and her theories regarding linguistic diversity placed her at odds with many of her colleagues. Set against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and a rising interest in Black identity politics, the intellectual milieu of the era reflected the tension involved in negotiating the definition, the purpose and even the necessity of so called Black English in the college classroom. As an African American female in the 1960s, Williamson resisted marginalization in ways that diverged from many of her African American colleagues—a position which may have exacted a heavy professional toll. Writing in 1965, Raven McDavid, Jr. states, “her [1961] dissertation should be one of the principal works consulted by those concerned with the speech of Negroes. However, the situation is the opposite; she is rarely mentioned, and almost never accurately cited by the authors and editors of the more popular treatments” (22).
a 1979 book review of a William Labov text fourteen years later, McDavid again notes the paucity of citations accorded Williamson. McDavid asserts: “. . . despite his [Labov’s] plea for development of linguists from ‘the black community’ there is no reference to Juanita Williamson (1968), to any of her subsequent work, or to that of her students” (299).

There remains conjecture as to the reason a prominent scholar of her time, a gifted African-American woman with a PhD in linguistics from the University of Michigan, remained on the fringe of her contemporary’s awareness. One possibility is that as a writing professor at a small southern HBCU, Williamson might not have been conferred the same respect that her contemporaries laboring in predominately white institutions enjoyed. Joan Weatherly, a friend of Williamson’s and retired English professor from the University of Memphis, maintains that the “trend toward Black English likely overshadowed her theories at the time.” While Williamson was heralded early on in her scholarship, ultimately, she seems to have become a minor figure as her career advanced.

Among those whose theories on language closely aligned with Williamson’s was Sledd, who is often referred to as “the conscience of the [emerging] field” of composition studies for his interrogation of so called “experts” in literacy instruction (Daniell “In Memoriam: James Sledd” 217). During the controversy regarding Black English, very few Black scholars were welcomed into the conversation. For example: Williamson observed the ironies regarding the “growing number of conferences at which [Black students’] speech is discussed and analyzed” (“A Look” 170). Citing conferences on the teaching of LWC to speakers of other languages and dialects held at the University of

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13 Punctuation original to McDavid.
Wisconsin and Georgetown University, Williamson noted, “Such conferences are usually directed by whites; few blacks are invited as discussants. Black persons are more frequently invited to participate in teacher training programs, [but] usually as learners” (“A Look at Black English” 170). The neglect of Black perspectives on issues of diversity in language would prove to be a festering concern in the coming years.

**Williamson Preaches What She Practices**

Activism through involvement in professional organizations, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communications (CCCC) and various linguistic societies was a means by which Williamson lent her voice to the era’s polemics. She argues:

> If you are going to keep the Black’s presence in professional organizations and activities, you’ve got to pay the memberships and get into the fray. You may be slapped down in the beginning, but you learn to bounce up and slap back in the professional way. I don’t mean ugliness, but you learn how to maneuver, and Blacks must do this—because if we do it, the doors are open for the next group [generation]; otherwise, the doors are closed. (qtd. in Miller 292)

Williamson, whose archive is replete with evidence of her participation in numerous academic conferences throughout the country, led an especially memorable conference in 1968 at the CCCC Convention. According to a Workshop Report published by NCTE, her presentation emphasized that the speech, morphological and syntactic elements of the area’s “Negroes” and whites who speak a Southern dialect of either standard or nonstandard variety are profoundly similar (258). An anonymous author recounts the main points of Williamson’s presentation:
-Every item found to occur among Negro speaker in Memphis can be found in the speech of whites speaking the Southern dialect, whether standard or nonstandard.

-That true substandard dialect items must be changed—granted with tact and understanding when they occur, to conform to what Professor Williamson called “The Language of the Marketplace.”

-Too often dialect is determined on the basis of race—the “white is right” syndrome.

-Negroes are often corrected for items of “Negro” dialect which in fact occur in standard Southern speech. Thus the concept of “Negro” dialect is in effect a misconception. (“Continuing Education for Teachers” 257) 14

In 1969, Williamson returned to the CCCC to chair Committee 17, “Varying Dialects in Oral and Written Discourse.” According to Workshop Reports:

[The session] centered on the questions of a definition of standard English and whether any standard English should be taught in the schools. No clear definition of standard English emerged; regional, social and stylistic characteristics all seemed involved. Some discussants and audience believed strongly that no attempt should be made to alter a student’s speech. Others believed equally strongly that the schools have an obligation to teach whatever tools are necessary for social mobility. (255)

During her presentations, Williamson enjoyed highlighting her research that cited linguistic features as distinctly geographical rather than racial phenomenon. For example, in a paper recovered from her archive, details of a 1975 panel are revealed:

Dr. Fred Tarpley recounted an experiment involving playing a tape of voices of several speakers, both Negro and white, to an audience who listed objectionable

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14 Punctuation original to “Continuing Education for Teachers.”
speech features. He found many unacceptable items in the first group (all Negro). Next, they heard the voice of Dr. Tarpley’s ‘beautiful blonde secretary’ and again noted unacceptable speech habits. These were exactly the same as for the Negro speakers. The audience could not believe that the last speaker was a white girl. The workshop concluded in Professor Williamson’s remark that this demonstration proved objections to ‘Negro’ speech to be social or racial, not cultural phenomena. (Williamson Archive)

Similarly, Bass recalled another incident in which Williamson set about transforming attitudes conflating dialect and race:

She wanted us [students] to realize how much language was tied to cultural perceptions and constructs. She often played tapes from her research in the mountains of Tennessee to ask for descriptions of the speaker. Always the references were to the education levels of the speakers with a regional location for the speaker as the second part of the description. Then she would play tapes recorded in Memphis. The references were to skin color and then education level. Of course, the pretension of educated speakers who are aghast, for example, at the assimilation problems found in the speech of the uneducated were a source of amusement, because she would play tapes that proved these educated speakers often exhibited the same problems in their relaxed speech. (Bass interview)

This exercise, according to Bass, additionally served to make her point about speech levels, or “registers,” through which speakers and writers move in accordance with their purpose, audience, topic and varying socio-economic levels.

**Resistance to Williamson’s Arguments**
Though few, Williamson did have theoretical allies in a small circle of scholars including Raven McDavid, Jr., James Sledd, Frederick Cassidy, James B. McMillan and Lawrence Davis. Sledd, in 1969, observed, “Black English provided the most lucrative new industry for white linguists, who found the mother lode when they discovered the interesting locutions which the less protected employ to the detriment of their chances for upward mobility” (1308). Sledd goes on to describe bi-dialectalism as “a cloak for white supremacy” (1308) and the chief reason Williamson refused to embrace Black English as a separate dialect at the height of its popularity in the seventies. Largely spearheaded by Geneva Smitherman, the Black English movement was fueled by a renewed appreciation for African American culture as a result of advances made in the civil rights movement and desegregation.

However, Williamson considered Smitherman an “upstart who had it all wrong” (Bass interview). Williamson had little patience for those who thought Black English was a separate language and even kept one of Smitherman’s books in her office where she made handwritten annotations expressing her disagreement throughout. Such an example may have been from Smitherman’s Talkin that Talk, in which Smitherman writes, “Black English . . . is not the same as white English. As long as we have two separate societies in contact and conflict, we’re going to have two separate languages. It just bees dat way” (367). Here, Smitherman delineates her argument that AAE is an expression of Black culture. Smitherman observes, “As a people, we have a connected culture and experience that comes out in our shared language . . . It has been necessary for survival and Black community solidarity for all of us to ‘talk that talk’” (Talkin that Talk 365). While Smitherman advocated the recognition and valorization of Black English as a language
system, Williamson understood dialectal differences as a function of geographical distinctions as opposed to racial phenomenon. Furthermore, Williamson argued that Black English, differentiated from so-called “standard” English, was yet another means by which racial oppression could be used by the dominant culture as a tool to perpetuate hegemony. The opposing views shared by these scholars created a certain degree of acrimony between them, according to colleague Weatherly (Weatherly telephone interview). Although her theories were largely discredited by subsequent scholars, her work is nevertheless important for her recognition of the importance of bridging the home dialect with the process of new linguistic skill acquisition.

Although Williamson remained deeply aware of pervasive racial inequity, in her own pedagogy she argued for methods that facilitated her students’ control over “whatever kind of English a given situation calls for” (“A Look at Black English” 173). Williamson and Brooks separately decried the notion that certain dialects are determinants of intellect. This theory was foundational in Williamson’s fight against the notion of conflating AAE with “non-standard” speech. In “A Look at Black English,” Williamson writes of the myths surrounding the specter of the Black student in the recently integrated classroom of the nineteen-seventies:

By the sixties, the black man’s blackness began to be highly visible. Nowhere was his visibility greater than in the schools. The black student’s presence in the once all-white classroom and the assignment of white teachers to all black schools often profoundly disturbed white teachers and administrators alike and frequently filled them with dismay. The reasons varied . . . but prominent among them were the ignorance of the black student, his low IQ, his inability to think abstractly, . . . and the
inability of the white teacher to understand him and his inability to understand her. The [myth was] that the black student could not be taught, many educators and language experts said, unless he learned a standard language. (169)

Furthermore, Williamson asserts that in the early days of integration, “Educators and psychologists have accepted the dictum of the linguists: that it is the language of the Black child that keeps him from learning to read, write and speak standard English” (“Black English” 2). In the same unpublished research paper entitled, “Black English: An Overview,” Williamson notes, “As long as the child’s mother was a cook for Miss Ann, Miss Ann could understand her. But when the cook’s child entered Miss Ann’s daughter’s classroom, the Black child could not be understood” (2). Brooks, writing in the same year, declares, “The greatest damage is done by the assumption that language reveals intellect. Without that clarification, we are led to absurd conclusions: that all speakers with Oxford accents are intelligent; that children from the slums of Cleveland and Appalachia are intellectually deficient; that a poet is brighter than a mute sculptor” (17). Williamson was vehement in her resistance to educational hegemony rooted in language bias.

Perhaps some of the most telling language bias is found in the pages of linguist Joey Lee Dillard. Dillard writes in 1972’s Black English that Williamson might “object to the implication that formal language is somehow above Negro influence” (216). Dillard asserts that Blacks are less able to speak correctly than their white counterparts. Dillard writes, “Black speakers, when trying to fancify their speech, used what they imagine to be Standard English forms and frequently insert the ‘wrong’ form of to be” (44). Williamson argued that not only were Blacks capable of speaking in higher or more
formal registers, “in most cases, the formal style is used where whites are essentially excluded” such as in African American churches (217). Williamson’s copy of Dillard’s *Black English*, examined in her archive, is replete with her annotations noting the thinly veiled racism within his text. In one passage, Dillard quotes Sir Charles Lyell whom Dillard describes as a “more talented and more intelligent observer” (188). Dillard describes Lyell’s account of “Negro” children learning to read alongside white children and observes with apparent sadness: “Unfortunately, the whites, in return, often learn from the Negroes to speak broken English, and in spite of losing much time in unlearning ungrammatical phrases, well-educated persons retain some of them all their lives” (188). Williamson’s handwritten annotation reads, “Whites could learn from blacks/but blacks couldn’t learn from whites” (Williamson Archive). Williamson’s animus toward Dillard’s views indicates the type of biased opinions Williamson encountered among her contemporaries in the linguistic community of the era.

In her unpublished research paper, “Black English: An Overview,” Williamson denounces Dillard for his pointedly racist views. She accuses Dillard of “denigrating Blacks” through his book *Black English* with his condescending declaration that “formal language is sometimes above Negro influence” and writes that Dillard’s sentence, “A man might suffer from a physical handicap like thick lips or a cleft palate” is not worthy of rebuttal or comment (“Black English: An Overview” 7). Williamson, however, did comment on a statement made by Robbins Burling in his popular 1973 book for English teachers, *English in Black and White*. Williamson suggests “Burling’s statement, found in *English in Black and White*, shows to a very large degree how little researchers know about Blacks.” She continues, “One would be inclined to laugh, if it were not for the fact
that this book is so widely used to teach teachers about Blacks and their language” (“Black English: An Overview” 7). Williamson reflects on Burling’s overtly caustic statement: When middle class blacks are honest with themselves, they know that even if they can manage standard English with ease, they are still burdened with the problem of old Aunt Susie back home in South Carolina who cannot manage it at all. What is to be done with Aunt Susie?” (“Black English: An Overview” 7).

The racist statements made by noteworthy linguistic scholars of the time underscore the professional challenges that Williamson faced during her career. Williamson, with her typical wit and candor, reflects upon Burling’s statement by observing, “Burling does not seem to know that most Blacks do not determine the worth of a relationship by the language used by a family member. If one must answer such a question, the only answer equal to such an absurdity is, ‘Kill her’” (“Black English: An Overview” 7). Lisa Delpit characterizes writers such as Dillard and Burling in her 1995 book, Other People’s Children: “The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential” (xv).

Linguistic scholars and educators from the late nineteen-sixties throughout the nineteen-seventies continued to debate the definition of Black English and its place in school. Williamson notes that before the nineteen-sixties, the speech of Black Americans was most frequently referred to as Negro non-standard English, Negro non-standard dialect, or Negro speech (“Black English: An Overview” 13). Illustrative of the politics which Williamson sought to subvert was a comment by W.A. Stewart, a nineteen-sixties era mentor of J.L. Dillard, author of the aforementioned tome Black English. Williamson
writes in “Black English: An Overview”: “Stewart, whose remarks are recorded [on page 25] in Philip Luelsforff’s *Linguistic Perspectives on Black English*, says, ‘I prefer to call (Black Americans’ speech) non-standard Negro dialect, Negro English or nigger English . . .’” (original punctuation). Stewart continues the sentence, adding: “or a whole series of things that focus on the specific non-standardness of them” (*Linguistic Perspectives* 24).

In an unpublished paper written around 1985 Williamson angrily decries attitudes surrounding Black speech such as that unashamedly exemplified by Stewart, a fellow academic colleague. Williamson’s personal and professional experiences with racism informed her astuteness in predicting the danger of equating race and language such as that epitomized in Stewart’s incredibly insensitive comment.

As linguists and researchers were drawn into the dialogue regarding Black dialect, Raven McDavid, Jr. writes in 1965, “The experience of the dialectologist is reminiscent, in a way, of that of the nuclear physicist two decades ago; long considered impractical dreamers, they suddenly find that they have in their hands awful potentials for the survival or the destruction of their way of life” (“American Social Dialects” 255). Eradicationists, proponents of Black English, and varying other linguistic theorists contributed to the dissensus swirling about the issue.

Concomitant with these events was the development of divergency studies, in which linguistic scholars theorized that the language of Black and white students were growing further apart. Language education had ideological implications, chief of which was the concern that Black children’s use of AAE would further suppress them educationally, socially, and ultimately, economically. Delpit asserts that President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” in the nineteen-sixties caused “a very awkward,
painful and public dance” regarding the state of African American language and its place in education: “With little or no empirical research, educational scholars, casting about for blame . . . hit upon the idea that the inferior language [of African American children] was the cause of their learning problem” (The Skin That We Speak xix). Williamson feared that privileging Black dialect would contribute to further marginalization of her race because of the cultural perception of the inferiority of AAVE as compared to “standard” English.

Scholarly debates regarding the pedagogical implications of dialectal difference continued unabated throughout the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties. Delpit observes that “because schools saw themselves as arbiters of what is proper, correct and decent, and African American language forms have been considered none of the above,” debates regarding African American language and its relationship to hierarchies of power persist (xxi). In a 1969 study, John Rickford pointed out “that teachers often have unjustifiably negative attitudes toward students who speak AAVE; it is worth noting that teacher expectations are closely tied to student achievement” (qtd. in Yang 126).

In the argument regarding the viability of Black English, Williamson represented one side of the hotly contested view regarding the dialect’s historical development. Louise A. DeVere writes in a 1971 essay, “Black English: Problematic But Systematic:”

Apart from the understanding that Black English can be designed and treated as a problematic nonstandard dialect, scholars and researchers have not reached agreement in some of the more abstract considerations. There are, in fact, a number of hotly disputed controversies. The historical development of Black English is a question that has by no means been settled, for there is one school of thought (represented by
Juanita Williamson) that holds that Black English developed from the British English of the early settlers; another view, (put forth by Lorenzo Turner and Ursula Walker) that the dialect has its origins in the African languages; and yet another contention (supported by William Stewart and Beryl Bailey) that it results from a pidgin-creole cycle. (38-39)

The academic conversation regarding differing aspects of Black English was the subject of a 1974 South Atlantic Bulletin essay, “Black English and Black Attitudes.” In it, David Shores writes, “As you know, there has been in the last ten to fifteen years, considerable discussion among linguists and educators and others about whether it is possible to characterize certain ‘distinctive’ nonstandard features of American English as Black English” (105). Shores associates Linguistic Atlas project participants, including Hans Kurath, Raven McDavid, Jr. and Frederic G. Cassidy as representatives of Williamson’s polemic stance:

These scholars . . . prefer to speak of statistical differences rather than inherent, structural differences. Their views can be summarized in Juanita Williamson’s work, the result of twenty years of observation in the South, which concludes that . . . the speech of the Negro does not differ materially from that of whites of the same economic and educational level of the area in which he has lived the greater part of his life. (Shores 105)

Notably, Shores cites one of Williamson’s most frequently used quotations: “The so-called distinctive features of Black English are neither Black nor White, just American” (105).
Rickford pointedly disagreed. Based on a study of speech patterns from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Rickford states, “While African Americans and whites have phonologically similar speech, grammatically, their speech is quite different. Therefore, the researcher/author contradicts the common assertion that once geography and class are controlled, white dialect and black speech in the South are identical” (qtd. in Yang 123).

Dillard in *Black English* also disagreed with Williamson’s geographical approach to linguistic variations, saying: “I believe that the geographic preconception about dialect distribution is, in many cases, downright wrong” (x). In a scathing fifteen page review of Williamson and Virginia Burke’s 1971 book, *A Various Language: Perspectives on American Dialects*, Dillard roundly criticizes Williamson and Burke for their failure to adapt to modern perspectives on the science of dialectology that depart from the influence of early twentieth-century linguist Hans Kurath and others who privilege geographic influence over other dialectal variations including “age-grade, sex role, professional affiliations, and many other social factors” (Dillard, “Review” 86). In his review of *A Various Language*, Dillard passionately denounces the authors’ apparent blind devotion to Kurath and *Linguistic Atlas* adherents. Dillard writes that Williamson and Burke’s edited collection of essays “is rather the graveyard in which the old is interred” instead of an important contribution to the field of linguistics (e“Review” 86).

Among the criticisms of Williamson and Kurath that Dillard levels is a hyper-focus upon dialect based primarily upon geographical features apart from other language influences. Dillard characterizes Williamson’s work as bogged down “in the static tradition of American dialect geography,” which he vilifies as “a relic of nineteenth century linguistics” (“Review” 76). Dillard continues to impugn Williamson’s
scholarship in his review and questions the research methods common to dialect geographers. Dillard notes the problematic nature of the sampling methodology used by geographic dialectologists that hint of reliability and validity issues, going so far as to term Williamson’s methodology as “inadequate” (76). Linguistic differences based upon geography invite a third criticism of Williamson’s position that the speech of Blacks and Southern whites are identical. Williamson’s argument that “features used to identify Black English are neither black nor white but American,” strongly discounts the historical impact of maritime contact languages which were common to a new country teeming with people on the move from established nations. Those coming to the New World likely spoke permutations (or pidginizations) of West African, American Indian and even Chinese dialects. Dillard castigates Williamson and her geographic dialectologist colleagues for their lack of consideration of dialects other than British, insisting “to consider the influence of special contact languages is a greater threat to the geographically oriented dialectologist than even disordered presentation” (“Review” 80). Although Williamson was certainly not without the justifiable critiques of her detractors, her scholarship nevertheless remains important. Williamson’s approach to writing instruction, which used a student’s home language to contrast it with new literacies such as “standard” English, ultimately became more useful in basic writing contexts than the previously used prescriptive methodologies.

According to Gilyard, teachers of AAE essentially fall into three categories. The first group, eradicationists, sees AAE as a barometer of deficiency and seek to rid the student of any trace of it, largely through drill and skill exercises. Pluralists, by contrast, seek reformation of society, rather than the student through the acceptance of AAE as a
dialect of equal importance as LWC. Bi-dialectalists understand that LWC is a requirement for success in academia and in the professional realm. Bi-dialectalists advocate alternating between dialects as the occasion demands. Although Williamson’s colleagues emphatically stated that she was not a bi-dialectalist, insisting that English was the colorless language of America, she also was averse to the term code-switching on the grounds that “there is no such thing as a code. English is English.” Bass said that Williamson often repeated the refrain that “Any child from LeMoyne Gardens (Housing Project) could be understood by a Harvard professor, and no code or interpreter was required for communication to occur” (Bass Interview). Williamson did make it clear, however, for that child to be educated at Harvard, she needed a command of “standard” English.

Williamson and Sledd separately expressed concern that prejudice might be fostered through bi-dialectalism, or the promotion of Black English. Sledd writes, “Upward mobility, it is assumed, is the end of education, but white power will deny upward mobility to speakers of Black English, who must therefore be made to talk white English in their contacts with the white world” (1309). Sledd continues to argue against eradication of the Black dialect, echoing the disjunction of repeating: “No dialect is better than any other while rallying poor and ignorant children to change their dialect, under the threat of ’remaining poor and ignorant’” (1310). Sledd contends that the “compassionate teacher, knowing the ways of society, will change the color of his students’ vowels although he cannot change the color of their skins” (1310). The argument over the place of Black English was imbued with educational and political imperatives. Sledd argues, Black people “may just not want to talk white English” because “obligatory bi-
dialectalism for minorities is only another mode of exploitation, another way of making
blacks behave as whites would like them to” (1314). Sledd and Williamson agreed that
the mannerisms of speech become shibboleths or social markers. This is why she
championed her students to enunciate their speech carefully even in their use of
“standard” English.

Sledd writes in 1969, “Differences in speech tell what groups a man belongs to.
He uses them to claim and proclaim his identity, and society uses them to keep him under
control” (1307). Williamson affirmed Sledd’s theory and challenged her students to
aspire to linguistic betterment to aid them in society. Williamson assessed the political
ramifications of bi-dialectalism with the statement, “As long as you can say that they
[Blacks] have their own language, then you don’t have to worry about them ever learning
to do anything well enough to get employed” (qtd. in Miller 291). Colleagues Bass and
Moore emphatically insisted that while Williamson promoted facility with dialects, she
was decidedly not a bi-dialectalist. Rather, she embraced English in its standard form as a
language for all Americans apart from race and class differences (Bass and Moore
Interview). Williamson’s arguments privileging “standard” English were likely informed
from the position of practicality and ideology. She deemed it unrealistic to expect
widespread conformance to what was then commonly considered a marker of a lower
socio-economic class. Anticipating that the trend toward Black English might
compromise her students’ mastery of the dominant dialect, she believed that
discrimination and hegemony would in turn, be perpetuated.

In my review of Williamson’s scholarship, I have come to several conclusions.
First, Williamson’s passionate interest in subverting racism through her theory that
dialectal differences are founded upon cultural interaction rather than racialized differences were important at a time in American history when Jim Crow subjugation and the ersatz science of eugenics were all too fresh in the collective American memory. Williamson’s insistence that linguistic differences are less about race than geographic elements are likely influenced by prevailing theories circulating during her lifetime that negatively attributed linguistic differences to racial biases.

Even as recent as the late nineteen-sixties, “environmental” theories were advanced to explain the disparity in reading levels between white and Black students (Stewart, “Current Issues” 5). Environmental theorists conjectured that “something in the Negro child’s social or physical environment has resulted in some form of ‘deprivation’ or deficit in the child’s ability to handle written language” (Stewart, “Current Issues” 6). In spite of the absurdity of basing linguistic differences upon physical characteristics including “thick lips” or other racialized features, Stewart argues that the environmentalist view “serves American egalitarianism well in its dismissal of ethnically-correlated cultural differences; for it is widely held to be more democratic to interpret Negro-white differences as pathogenic than as normal” (Stewart, “Current Issues” 6). Stewart was a proponent of the early nineteen-sixties-era Chicago dialect reader, *Teaching Black Children to Read*. The text was arguably the first bridge reader in Black dialect written specifically for “lower-class Negro children” new to integrated schools. The text was designed to facilitate the students’ grasp of standard English with the “non-standard” dialect of the home and did not advocate teaching Black English as some African American educators had asserted (Stewart, “Current Issues” 4). However, Stewart publically fingered opponents the dialect reader, writing “we knew that the
strongest opponents of any public or professional focus on the [Negro] dialect were liable to be middle-class Negroes” who resented what they perceived to be the stereotyping of their race (Stewart, “Current Issues” 6). Stewart rationalizes that Black resistance to the dialect reader is informed by “black cultural self-hate” (Stewart, “Current Issues” 6). Stewart writes of the negative reception of the dialect reader among Black educators, stating “there was apparently something about the explicit and formal recognition of Negro dialect involved in writing it [Black dialect] down in books which made this an entirely different threat in their eyes” ((Stewart, “Current Issues” 6”). Stewart’s comments may have served to incense Williamson, fueling her fervor to advance her crusade against linguistic racism such as that blatantly flaunted by Stewart, a prominent white linguist of his time.

Secondly, Williamson was decidedly not conservative in advancing her (often unpopular) linguistic theories to nineteen-sixties era audiences who may have been reluctant to give credence to a Black woman from the South with a terminal degree in linguistics. However, her bold stance that Black dialect resulted solely from the pidginization of African tribal languages with the dialects of illiterate British overseers now seems reductive and delimiting. Taking a backward glance into history, Williamson’s name may have become as familiar as Smitherman’s had she not situated her theories from a position of fear of racism and instead embraced the cultural movement toward acceptance of diversity as a means of power and resistance. Furthermore, had Williamson remained open to the possibility that Black English had more than a singular avenue of emergence and not discounted newer research that supplanted that which was commonly used by dialect geographers, she may have made
even more significant contributions to our understanding of the connections between language, culture, and ideology.

Instead, Williamson’s legacy is that which is recorded by her nemesis J. L. Dillard who describes her as “a hyper-sensitive Black academic trained in dialect geography (All-American English 176) . . . [who] turns the conversation [about Black English] into a diatribe against slavery and racial prejudice” (Dillard, “Review” 81). Irrespective of the opinions of her detractors, Williamson’s greatest contribution comes by way of her foundational approach to the understanding the social constituents of language, and for her role in the linguistic turn in composition history.

Conclusion

The profound cultural upheaval of the period from 1957-1968 not only brought irrevocable changes in American society but were significant in impelling college writing classrooms to better serve all Americans through influential scholars such as Williamson. As academic theories collided with societal nineteen-sixties-era shifts to inform the national question regarding the definition of African American English and the politics of its place in the American educational system, palpable frustration also grew. While African American educators had initial hopes of attaining educational equality as a result of 1954’s Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation, “the goal of a fully integrated educational system was still unrecognized by the late 1960s” (Perry 169). However, the frustration accompanying the disappointingly slow results of the 1954 Supreme Court decision served to further galvanize a people to action. Patsy Perry writes in her description of the College Language Association in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*: “the CLA Journal
began to reflect the deep frustration and disappointment in their [members’] continued isolation . . .” which in turn, led the “promotion of their own racial heritage and . . . their sense of oneness with other blacks throughout the world” (169). The next chapter takes up the “sense of oneness” manifested through other voices whose arguments ultimately led to a broader approach in incorporating diversity into the college writing classroom and contributed to the adoption of the STROL resolution.

The arguments surrounding Black English, which were never formally settled with consensus, explored the subtleties of the culture and social contexts in relation to the language that accompanied it. Delpit underscores this contention: “In the Ebonics debate of 1996, in the War on Poverty reports of the 1960s and early 1970s, and in the furor surrounding the King (Ann Arbor) case in the early 1980s, the public discussions and publicized scholarly research ended rather suddenly and with no resolution” (The Skin That We Speak xxi). It is within this context that the seeds for NCTE’s most controversial Resolution—1974’s SRTOL—were sown. Through her research, her presentations at multitudes of academic conference and meetings, her publications and perhaps most of all, her tireless persistence, Juanita Williamson helped advance the dialogue regarding linguistic plurality to the wider stage of public consciousness. Although Williamson pointedly disagreed with many aspects of SRTOL, her efforts indirectly lead to the acceptance of foundational principles of the resolution as discussed in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Personal and the Political: Voices Leading to SRTOL

“Language is the basic instrument of the social reality. Created in the human environment, adaptable and subject to change, it is a tool that man manipulates to a desired end. It is power.” Geneva Smitherman in “Black Power is Black Language” (88).

At the zenith of the civil rights movement in 1967, the Los Angeles Free Press, an underground weekly newspaper, published a polemic written by a California activist-English professor. Jerry Farber’s “The Student as Nigger” manifesto received national acclaim for its eye-opening, scathing rebuke of higher education as an institution analogous to a modified master/slave dynamic. College students and even their professors, according to Faber’s Freireian-dystopian description, are pawns subject to the whims of an academic regime that privileges unquestioned obedience over critical thinking and intellectual rigor. Faber argues that an authoritarian veil embellished with “erudition and heavy irony” provides cover for many a nineteen-sixties-era educator’s inadequacies in dealing with differences that in the recent past did not exist between student and pedagogue—such as the difference between a professor’s language “and theirs” (Farber 95).

Farber’s radical, yet powerful assertions illustrate the sweeping changes that rocked the academy during the late nineteen fifties through the early nineteen seventies as the university—and the wider culture itself—faced the challenges of embracing true democratization. This chapter examines some of the potent social forces of 1957-1973 that were the impetus for changes in educational theory and policy relative to English composition instruction during this timeframe. The purpose of the chapter is to explain how protest movements such as Black Power intermingled with voices in academe to
create space for social justice in the writing classroom through means such as the SRTOL Resolution.

As an aside, many important words such as “Black” and “Negro” have typographical inconsistencies throughout this chapter because they were terms that were themselves in flux during the time period under study. Because I choose to capitalize both words, variations from this practice indicate my allegiance to the text of the authors I quote; footnotes provide a reference to those instances.

**Black Power, Racial Labels, and Identity**

Black Power, according to social and political theorist Lucius Outlaw, was far more than a social movement running concurrently alongside and outside of the civil rights movement. Black Power was “a complex process that moved toward ‘conscious raising’ and ‘conscious-transforming’ [via] cultural organizations, curricula, disciplines, and programmatic possibilities” (Outlaw 124). For clarification, Outlaw defines the Black Power movement as “a social movement characterized by the collection of organizations, persons . . . that had in common some form and degree of commitment to the idea of . . . a shared heritage and identity as a people of African descent responsible for charting and working to realize a future of their own choice and making” (124). Black Power, and its concurrent referents to identity and cultural pride, augmented the emerging argument that Black English merits linguistic legitimacy as a marker of diversity deserving of more than derision because of its lingering status as a non-prestige dialect. Linguistic differences are verbal shadows of a person’s identity connecting the present with the past. In an effort to valorize the distinctive elements of identity as manifested through language, scholars including linguists Geneva Smitherman and James Sledd along with
compositionists Ernece Kelly and James Banks helped through persistent activism, to advance arguments in favor of linguistic pluralism that are discussed later in this chapter.

To illustrate the deep connection between society and linguistic practices, Pierre Bourdieu argues: “The sociology of language is logically inseparable from a sociology of education” (62). Illustrating the corollary of language, education, and the cascading effects of wanton disregard for a student’s culture and language of nurture, Bourdieu writes:

Given that the educational system possesses the delegated authority necessary to engage in a universal process of durable inculcation in matters of language, and given that it tends to vary the duration and intensity of this inculcation in proportion to inherited cultural capital, it follows that social mechanisms of cultural transmission tend to reproduce the structural disparity between the very unequal knowledge of the legitimate language and the much more uniform recognition of this language. ¹⁵ (62)

Bourdieu calls the chasm between socially constructed ideas of language “correctness” and incorrectness “a disparity that generates tension and pretension . . . in social space” (62). The tension described by Bourdieu personifies the crux of the importance of the linguistic turn in composition history and the arguments leading to the adoption of SRTOL. Bourdieu’s perspectives on the interplay between linguistic practices and power relations within a heterogeneous society foreground an exploration of how language affects and intersects issues of identity, class, and race—a key issue of SRTOL.

Because identity bears a relationship to political and educational issues such as that embodied in SRTOL, a discussion of racial labels is helpful in situating social, ¹⁵ Emphasis is Bourdieu’s.
political, and cultural conditions that led to the adoption of the Resolution. Widespread attention directed to issues regarding Black speech and dialects of difference in the mid-nineteen-sixties were spurred onward in response to dramatic social change combined with “White America’s attempt to deal with this newly released [B]lack energy” (Smitherman, *Talkin’ and Testifyin* 2). The 1954 Supreme Court decision mandating school desegregation, Rosa Park’s 1955 symbolic start to the modern day civil rights movement through her refusal to move to the back of a bus, and the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr. are several catalysts which linguist and African American language specialist Geneva Smitherman identifies as fueling African Americans’ cultural consciousness and the concurrent rise of the Black Power movement (*Talkin and Testifyin* 2). The linguistic difference of African American speech as contrasted with so-called “Standard English” collectively reified the meta-struggle for social equality at a time in which Jim Crow laws were not yet an anomaly. Smitherman argues for the importance of names, asserting [they] “are not merely words, but concepts which suggest implications, values, history, and consequences beyond the word or mere ‘name’ itself” (*Talkin and Testifyin* 42). Smitherman asserts that embracing “Black-ness” during the black consciousness movement of the nineteen-sixties was a symbolic means of foisting symbolic resistance against white domination—including the right of African-Americans to self-identify with the preferred term “Black” as opposed to “Negro,” the label commonly used by whites (*Talkin and Testifyin* 41). By extension, during the emergence of Black nationalism, many Black Americans found incongruity in switching from their
home dialect to “standard” English, considered by some as the language of white supremacy.\footnote{A term used by James Sledd in his essay, "Bi-Dialectalism: The Linguistics of White Supremacy." \textit{The English Journal} 58.9 (1969): 1307-29. Print.}

It is precisely because of the interconnectedness of personal identity to language use that the SRTOL Resolution became important in composition history; not necessarily for what it achieved or did not achieve, but for the demarcation it created between acceptance of linguistic plurality and the privileging of long held ideologies regarding language use that could simply no longer stand in an increasingly diverse society.

Beginning in the late nineteen fifties there was a move from the descriptor “Negro” in favor of the term “Black.” The evolution of a racial label that a group accepts or rejects for itself offers insight relative to the relationship of culture to language use. It also exemplifies the relationship of language to identity, particularly as it pertains to issues that are specific to minority groups such as African Americans. Sociologist and researcher Tom W. Smith writes of the importance of racial labeling relative to the evolution of the descriptor from “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” to “African American” over the last century. Smith notes the special importance of racial designations to Black Americans because such labels “point to changes [that] can be seen as attempts by Blacks to redefine themselves and to gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior” (Smith 496). Smith notes that the term “Colored” was the commonly accepted label used by whites for American Blacks from the mid to late nineteenth century due to the term’s inclusivity; it encompassed mulattoes and others of mixed racial ancestry as well as those with complete Black ancestry (497).
However, Smith provides background for reasons the term fell out of favor. Smith writes that a growing non-Caucasian population including Asian immigrants rendered the term too comprehensive. With the encouragement of influential Black leaders including Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, the designate “Negro” gained prominence not only for the perceived strength associated with the term, but for the linguistic economy it offered, as it needed no noun to complete its meaning (i.e., “Colored people” versus “Negro”) (Smith 497). Kelly Miller, professor emeritus at Howard University, advocates for the merits of the term in 1937, stating: “Usually where deep-seated, philosophical meaning is involved, 'Negro' is a much stronger term of the two. Try, if you will, to express the idea involved in Negro art, Negro music, Negro poetry . . . and the Negro Yearbook in terms of the word 'colored,' and see what a lamentable weakness would result in this substitution” (145).

Smith attributes the influx of immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to the “idea that Blacks needed a specific group name” comparable to other nationalities represented by designates such as “Italian or Polish” (498). According to Smith, the term “Negro” offered a means through which African Americans could imagine a society that was more accepting of their culture. Smith asserts: “for a short spell, the term ‘Negro’ occupied roughly the same place as the words ‘Black’ and ‘Afro-American occupy today’” (498). By the mid-twentieth century, the moniker replaced “Colored” in most Black organizations (Smith 498). However, the progress of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the influence of the Black Power movement resulted in widespread derision of the term. African Americans were anxious to cast off labels assigned them in order to effectuate a re-branding of their race on their
own terms. Smitherman offers her opinion on the matter: “The designate ‘Black’ calls to mind power, black magic, even evil, whereas, ironically, *Negro* suggests no such associations, especially to a generation of whites who had long since forgotten—if they ever knew—that *Negro* means ‘black’ anyway” (*Talkin and Testifyin* 41). However, as John Baugh recalls, “The changing terminology was not the result of political correctness; rather, linguists were seeking to pinpoint culturally relevant terminology . . . from linguistic changes within Black communities across the nation” (Baugh 665). Baugh, himself African American, relates, “during my childhood, referring to another African American as Black was considered highly offensive” (665). Baugh recalls that during the nineteen-sixties, the slogan “Black is Beautiful” and lyrics by popular soul artist James Brown that called for African Americans to “Say it loud; I’m Black and I’m Proud” marked a change in the perception of the designate “Black” as a term of derision (665).

The important role of group identifiers is illustrated by John Bowers, Donovan Ochs, Richard Jensen and David Schultz in *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control*. Bowers et al. argue that it is not uncommon for a group to choose a word with a negative connotation and invert its meaning to “promote its use as a positive attribute” (38). Black Power activists, painfully aware of the widely-held negative associations of the word “Black,” transformed the word into a symbol of racial pride and strength through means such as slogans and music lyrics (Bower et al. 38).

Because terminology often supports social movements such as Black Power by offering “another means of building solidarity” within the community, key identifiers
take on added import (Bowers et al. 38). Stokely Carmichael,17 who is often attributed with advancing the Black Power movement of the late nineteen-sixties, writes of the need to control the language used to describe Black Americans. He argues, “If we allow white people to define us by calling us Negroes, which means apathetic, lazy, stupid, and all those other things, then we must accept those definitions. We18 must define what we are—and then move from our definitions and tell them, recognize what we say we are!” (Carmichael as quoted in Towns 182). The conflation of identity and language denoted by Smitherman and Carmichael’s assertions provide context attesting to the relationship between discourse and selfhood. African American Studies specialist Martha Biondi writes of the importance of this shift in consciousness spurred by Black nationalism via the Black Power movement, noting its emphasis on racial solidarity and African culture was “a catalyst for political action and forging a new Black conscious” (4). A cultivation of respect for Black identity was an important element of the Black Power movement; Black language was a symbolic part of the quest for racial pride. African American language was in many ways a communal expression of rhetorical agency representing unity and resistance through a shared experience and a shared dialect, both of which helped to solidify African Americans’ right to define themselves along their own terms, using words of their own choosing. To illustrate this point, social scientist Hanna Mari-Husu asserts that “identity movements [such as Black Power] can be understood as cultural meaning producers that create values and new points of view in opposition to imposed modes of thought that marginalize and devalue certain individuals and groups”

17 Stokely Carmichael later became known as Kwame Ture.

18 Emphasis is Ture/Carmichael’s.
Husu’s assertion is clearly evident through even a brief analysis of the Black Power movement as African Americans sought to gain control of the trajectory of their collective identity as Black Americans.

Largely influenced by the Black Muslims and the Black Panthers, Smith notes the term “Negro” was “criticized as [a name] imposed on Blacks by whites denoting subservience, complacency, and ‘Uncle Tomism’”—characteristics that were decidedly antithetical to the ideals of the Black Power social movement and its pointed rejection of the status quo in favor of militarism, Black pride, and cultural advocacy” (499). Along with skin color, the manner in which many Black Americans spoke drew attention in newly desegregated classrooms. Language differences may have seemed particularly pronounced in the early days of integration, especially when contrasted against the so-called normative Mid-Western dialect associated with the status quo, commonly referred to as “standard English.”

In essence, the social value conferred by a descriptor such as “Colored,” “Negro,” or “Black” is, according to Pierre Bourdieu, an “objective criteria” that is shaped by social practices and reinforced by them (221). Bourdieu argues that group identifiers carry political and social connotations that are defined by the culture and the era in which they are used (221). Furthermore, Bourdieu’s assertions regarding linguistic semiotics help clarify arguments regarding AAL use as contrasted with “standard” English in the classroom. Struggles over language issues embody the deeply personal levels to which protest movements such as Black Power appealed; it fomented resistance against systemic injustices that could no longer be tolerated on all levels. A periodical’s intentional insult in refusing to capitalize “Negro” reveals the intricacies of the
undeniable relationship of the status quo and literate practices to the relationship of language to identity. The SRTOL Resolution was drafted in order to substantiate the relationship of language to identity through the work of scholars who were passionate about bridging the gap long forged by racism in and out of the English composition classroom.

At a time in American history in which the ideology of Black Power comingled with increasing societal resistance to the status quo, the scene was set for finally reconciling the juxtaposition of justice promised by the Constitution against the daily injustices targeted at African Americans. The work of civil rights stalwarts M.L. King Jr., Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and H. Philip Randolph allied with organizations such as the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee to become critical agents in turning the tables on centuries of injustice. The individual and collective efforts of these leaders and their constituents combined with a rising interest in Black identity politics represented by the Black Power movement to lessen the divide between what democracy promised—and that which democracy delivered.

Outlaw, in Critical Social Theory in the Interests of Black Folks, argues that hindsight provides an “even more potent legacy” of the emergence of the Black Power movement (125). Outlaw, writing in 2005, suggests the importance of the Black Power movement in spawning changes in American culture, education, and society in general. Outlaw argues: “We can now identify it [the Black Power movement] as a defining historical development in the contemporary United States for what is now referred to as ‘the politics of identity, difference, and recognition’” (125). Similarly, the politics of
identity, difference, and recognition represented by the Black Power movement are also 
key elements embodied in the SRTOL Resolution adopted by the Conference on College 
Composition and Communication (CCCC) in 1974. The Resolution calls the academy to 
adopt new perspectives on dialects of difference while acknowledging the interplay of 
language and identity. The SRTOL Resolution reads:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the 
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 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. (Passed by CCCC Executive Committee, November 1972; 
ratified by CCCC membership, 1974)

The SRTOL Resolution stood as a bold declaration that academic leadership was 
ready to begin the separation from reliance on prescriptivist practices in earnest; 
academic discourse was the vehicle as well as the symbol of this progressive move. The 
discipline of composition studies served as an appropriate academic entry point to social 
change. As Stephen Parks notes, composition studies, more than any other discipline, 
“owes its current status to counterhegemonic struggles waged around access to higher 
education” (viii). As history attests, language and rules governing it have traditionally
echoed power struggles and changes taking place in the margins of the larger culture.\textsuperscript{19}

The Black Power movement and the advocacy of Black English were two manifestations of resistance that shared the ideological imperatives of class, politics, and culture to oppose institutionalized racism. Existing coterminously, the Black Power movement and the arguments surrounding the acceptability of Black English effectively echoed the socio-cultural climate both inside and outside of the academy.

While many academics took up advocacy for linguistic pluralism in the late nineteen-sixties, there are many whose words still resonate in the twenty-first century. The following section takes up several activist/scholars whom I identify as central to the development and championing of the main arguments for SRTOL. While there are many scholar/proponents enthusiastically defending linguistic plurality in the college classroom during this time in history, the arguments these academics proffer best represent the justification and rationale for the controversial SRTOL Resolution, in my estimation.

\textbf{The Black Caucus and the Rise of the Scholar/Activists}

The strong current of the Black Power movement trickled from the streets and spilled into college classrooms by way of an enlightened awareness that change was no longer an option, change was a necessity. For college composition, argues urban education specialist Carmen Kynard, the Black Power movement influenced college curricula via two parallel platforms: first, “a protracted campaign for social justice and racial equality by African American scholars in and against NCTE as they formed their first Black Caucus as a special interest group of the CCCCs; and [second,] a protracted

\textsuperscript{19} John Brereton’s \textit{The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875–1925: A Documentary History} and Robert Connors’s \textit{Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy} provide excellent overviews of the relationship of culture to writing instruction.
campaign against racism in education where language rights carried the Black Power
banners of self-determination, independence, and freedom from white rule” (74). Kynard
notes that the works of three English scholars in particular, Geneva Smitherman, Ernece
Kelly, and Vivian Davis were especially effective in establishing a foundation for the
evolution of SRTOL because of their political connections inside and out of NCTE’s
Black Caucus. Deeply connected to the African American community and egalitarianism
in education, Kelly, Davis, and Smitherman lent their passion and their voices to issues
relative to the acceptance of linguistic pluralism in the public forum of the Conference on
College Composition and Communication’s parent organization, the NCTE.

Emboldened by the political struggles of Blacks nationwide, Marianna W. Davis
and Delores Minor were two Black scholars who led the charge to encourage
desegregation in professional societies that met annually to discuss language issues
facing American collegiate English students of all races. In November 1967, the pair
became instrumental in sowing the seeds for NCTE’s Black Caucus in Hawaii. Led by
Davis and Minor, a delegation of Black college English instructors traveled to the
NCTE’s annual convention in Hawaii to redress the need for Black representation in the
organization’s governing boards and add their voices to issues of concern regarding the
Black college student. While convening, Davis and her colleagues became keenly aware
of the appalling lack of representation of Black representatives evidenced by the ratio of
white members to Black members at 1,141 to 25. Furthermore, of all NCTE officers,
none were Black, though William Jenkins was a candidate for President-Elect (Davis 6).
While in Hawaii, Davis and other Black NCTE members including Charlotte K. Brooks,
Lorena E. Kemp, and Darwin Turner made plans to enfranchise Black educators at the
upcoming 1968 spring convention in Milwaukee. Regarding the paucity of Black leadership within the ranks of NCTE, Davis remarks: “The minutes of the NCTE Business Meetings from the 1950’s and 1960’s clearly shows that this professional organization of English, literature, and writing teachers, from kindergarten to the university was a very segregated group, with white men in every decision-making post” (Davis 8). Indeed, Lloyd-Jones chronicles the pervasive racism within the Conference on College Composition and Communication around 1967 by stating, “Racism in CCCC was not merely covert. At the CCCC Louisville [in 1967] the nominating committee, following the custom of the time, offered only one candidate for chair and we evaded an opportunity to choose Darwin Turner, who had been energetically suggested” (3). Lloyd-Jones ruefully bemoans the lost opportunity for the Conference on College Composition and Communication to offer leadership positions to its African American members. The reality of the lack of Black representation at CCCC and NCTE conferences was significant because issues relative to composition pedagogy and the changing student demographic were being discussed, debated, and pondered. Many of the conference presentations included such topics as addressing the challenges of teaching “poor writers,” yet professional organizations were reluctant to listen to the voices of Black professors who had the most experience in teaching writing to students new to the desegregated college classroom.

The impetus for Davis and her NCTE Black colleagues was the drafting of a resolution dealing with issues facing educators of minority students. NCTE Resolution Number Five, which was supported by James Sledd, Richard Braddock, Wallace

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20 For example, Panel 14 at the April 1967 CCCC meeting in Louisville included a paper delivered by Christopher Reaske entitled, “Assisting the Very Poor Writer.”
Douglas, Darwin Turner, and Harry Walen, was accepted unanimously with slight revisions at the Milwaukee 1968 NCTE annual meeting in November (Davis 7). I argue that NCTE Resolution Number Five was a precursor to SRTOL and reflected the frustrations of English instructors of all stripes in meeting the needs of students in a changing culture. Resolution Number Five reads as follows:

1. THAT the National Council of Teachers of English call upon all teachers of language arts to recognize they must do far more than they have done to meet the needs of young people in minority groups within this multicultural society.

2. THAT the membership support the intention of the Executive Committee to commit a higher proportion of the resources of the Council to find new and imaginative solutions to the language needs of these young people.

3. THAT each member of the committees and commissions of the Council take immediate steps to reconsider the goals and priorities of the committee or commission, so as to devote greater energy toward finding and implementing solutions which will meet the needs of these young people.

4. THAT each member of NCTE be exhorted to reflect on his responsibilities in the present crisis to act within his competence to resolve that part of the crisis that is within his reach.

Turner and other like-minded scholars who were responsible for drafting the Black Caucus’s Resolution Number Five called attention to the ways in which NCTE and CCCC mirrored the larger ideals of a pro-segregationist culture that were incompatible with a more empathetic and egalitarian stance typical of most professional educational associations. Adding to this milieu were the attitudes of Black students entering white
college classrooms for the first time. James Banks, in his 1968 College Composition and Communication essay, “A Profile of the Black American: Implications for Teaching,” notes that African American students often entered schools “with negative attitudes toward their own race” brought about by decades of Jim Crow and oppression (293). Banks, a diversity and multicultural researcher and Fellow of the American Educational Research Association, reasons the need for change rests on concepts of affirming Black student identity. He writes in 1968: “[C]olleges must implement systematic programs to help black youngsters augment their self-concepts, clarify their racial attitudes and develop higher educational aspirations” (293). Banks calls for an end to systemic racism in education in order to mirror a culture that is increasingly resistant to the imposition of white Anglo-Saxon protestant values (294). Banks observes, “A New ‘Negro’ is in the making, one who is trying to reject his old identity, which has been shaped by a large extent by white society, and to create a new one” (295). This “New Negro,” Banks emphatically states, “is shouting ‘Black Power’” (295).

One of the means by which to achieve these goals, Banks argues, is through “changing the college curriculum so that it is more congruent with the needs of black students” (293). Specifically, Banks, like Du Bois, argues for a curriculum that includes—and does not elide—the important contributions of “black Americans to history, literature, science, and the arts” (Banks 294). Banks maintains that “Colleges have a tremendous responsibility to help black students mitigate negative racial attitudes which they frequently hold toward themselves to develop an appreciation for their culture, thus increasing their self esteem” (294). Banks along with John Baugh, Geneva

21 Capitalization is original to Banks in this sentence and the one that follows.
Smitherman, Juanita Williamson, James Sledd, and Raven McDavid, Jr. added their voices to the rising call for an awareness of the relationship between identity and a student’s language of nurture.

Perhaps the most vehement proponent of AAL during the nineteen-sixties through the decade of the nineteen-seventies was Geneva Smitherman, a linguist whose contributions to the field of composition studies allowed a deeper understanding of AAL and its cultural and rhetorical suitability to the college classroom.

The elementary school teacher who perceived that a child’s African American dialect was an impediment to her ability to learn—and consequently placed her in remedial reading group—would have no way of knowing that decades later Smitherman would become one of the foremost academics advocating for full acceptance of dialectal pluralism in education. Among the many voices joining in chorus against linguistic racism was that of Smitherman. Hers was perhaps the most persistent, if not the most political voice among the many scholarly advocates of AAL, for her involvement in the polemics of linguistic plurality were multi-faceted, deeply personal, and widely respected. Keith Gilyard notes the wide-ranging influence of Smitherman’s research and study of African American language writing when he writes that she “has illumined questions of language, education, and power for several generations of teachers and scholars who look to her for leadership” (Gilyard, “Geneva’s Quartet” 171). Russel Durst, past president of the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy, contends Smitherman was extremely influential in “articulat[ing] many of the key ideas embodied in . . . urging full acceptance of minority dialects of English, advocating closer attention to language diversity in education, calling for the mixing of Standard and
Nonstandard English, and combing in her own writing different codes in rhetorically effective ways” (57). Smitherman carried the torch of African American Language advocacy beyond the realm of her academic pursuits, becoming an activist for linguistic pluralism in a range of public dimensions from legislative wrangling to championing educational policy benefiting minority students and the language they carry into the classroom. According to Durst, Smitherman’s work has remained impactful for its contribution to the negation of stereotypes characterizing AAL as an inferior dialect associated with race. Her research as a linguist proved particularly insightful because she successfully argued that AAL—in addition to containing a vast repertoire of rhetorical subtleties—is a rule-driven and systematic dialect common to millions of Americans (59). One way in which Smitherman distinguished herself and her argument regarding the validity of AAL is through her use of it in her scholarship. Durst notes Smitherman’s prescience in alternating between AAL and Standard English to produce rhetorically effective writing. “Smitherman asserted these ideas long in advance of the more recent discussions; current scholars have employed them as foundational concepts in translingualism and code-meshing” (Durst 61). An example of her rhetorical dexterity is taken from Smitherman’s essay, “Where Do We Go From Here? T.C.B.!” In reference to the argument over what is Standard or non-standard, proper or preferred, Smitherman observes, “saying something correctly, and saying it well, are two entirely different Thangs” (229). Her tireless efforts to bring recognition to AAL as a legitimate language form complete with its own lexicon, grammar, rhetorical flourishes, and history make her one of the predominant voices leading up to STROL.
For clarification, a definition of Black Dialect is useful in context. Smitherman declares, “Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English” incorporating linguistic and cultural elements of the Black experience that reflects “conditions of servitude, oppression of life in America (Talkin and Testifyin 3). Smitherman further clarifies Black Dialect as “Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone and gesture . . . used by 80 to 90 percent of American Blacks” at some point in time (Talkin and Testifyin 3). The voices of those speaking in Black dialect came to represent a major crisis in late nineteen sixties-era education because their presence announced that a time had come for change in attitudes and change in pedagogy—change that was initiated by activist scholars. Black Power proved to be influential not only in the national political sphere, but at deeply personal levels—from backlashes against referents used as descriptors to arguments regarding the privileging of one dialect over another in the English classroom. Black Language, which Smitherman defines as “Africanized English,” became a lightning rod for controversy in the classroom and beyond as its legitimacy was debated in professional societies to radio call-in shows to family living rooms (“African American Language” 547). At the heart of the issue surrounding African American Language (AAL) was the long held “dialect of deficiency” theory and the hegemonic undertones epitomized by this perception. A component of dialect deficit theories was the specter of blatant racism exemplified in the scholarship of linguist Raven McDavid, Jr.

McDavid’s early work served as a foundation for rebuttals against scientific racism that positioned Black dialect alongside other dialects. Regarding Dutch and Scandinavian influences on the speech of regions of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania
and the Dakotas, McDavid argued: “We do not explain this influence on the basis of Scandinavian hair color, German skull configuration, or Dutch mouth shape, but on the grounds that two languages were spoken side by side so that bilingualism developed in the community” (3). McDavid notes however, that judgments formed on Negro speech have been reversed; rather than attribute cultural transmission of speech forms—as with Dutch and Scandinavian influences on regional patterns—“the explanation of Negro dialects are given in terms of a ‘simple, childlike mind’ or of physical inability to pronounce sounds . . . because his lips are too thick” (4). McDavid fearlessly points out the harsh incongruities scholars harbored in analyzing white and non-white language patterns objectively.

Shuy, who contends that Black Vernacular English was “not discovered by sociologists until the sixties and seventies,” insists McDavid was prescient in anticipating the controversy that would arise regarding differences in Black and white speech (“Review” 471). Writing in 1951, McDavid was, according to Shuy, among the very first linguistic scholars to write about the relationship of Black to white speech, and to observe the inequities between theories surrounding Caucasian-linguistic influences and theories regarding the speech of Black Americans (471). For example, McDavid writes that “the popular misinterpretation” regarding Negro speech stems from the fact that “unlike other groups of foreign-language origin, [the Negro] is readily identifiable by skin pigmentation” (“The Relationship” 4). McDavid goes on to assert that “whatever differences the naïve observer notices . . . is interpret[ed] as a function of physical difference” (“The Relationship” 4). That physical difference, according to McDavid, is exacerbated by the “history of Negro-white relationships” which at mid-century, were
compromised by widespread, commonly accepted prejudice, and even discriminatory legislation (“The Relationship” 4).

Smitherman, picking up on the assumptions of fellow linguist McDavid, offers two ideologies contributing to the inferior perception of Black dialect that prevailed during the late 1950s through the late 1960s. First, Smitherman notes the erroneous perception of AAL use as a reflection of “cognitive and/or sociocultural deficiency”, and second, that AAL is indicative of “learning disabilities and communication disorders in Black students” requiring remediation (“African American Language” 547). Specifically, Smitherman notes the need to combat the false conception offered by 1960s-era psychologists that linguistic differences among Blacks equated to a lack of intelligence. Cognitive deficit theories were propounded by psychologists Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engleman who in 1966 argued: “The language of culturally deprived children . . . is not merely an underdeveloped version of standard English, but is a basically non-logical mode of expressive behavior” (Bereiter and Engleman 112-113). Writing in 1968, the often-quoted psychologist Arthur Jensen argued that in regard to human intelligence, genetic factors have primacy over cultural influences such as poverty. Because Jensen held that intelligence was demarcated along racial lines, he insisted that compensatory programs such as Head Start are consequently doomed to fail (5). Similarly, Martin Deutsch, a researcher on African American language and culture, argued in 1963 from a “cultural deprivation” position that asserted Black students lack the environmental advantages of middle-class white children which places them at distinct educational disadvantage. Black students, Deutsch generalized, do not benefit from verbal interaction with adults in the home, which in turn, adversely affects the development of a range of
cognitive skills, “including the ability to reason abstractly, to speak fluently, and to focus upon long-range goals” (Deutsch qtd. in Labov “Academic Ignorance” n.p). Deutsch, writing in 1967, describes the home environment of a “lower-class” Black student as one rife with noise and chaos attendant with “the daily living stresses” of a crowded apartment that in turn, inures her to attentiveness (48). This condition is exacerbated by the lack of “practice from adults correcting [her] enunciation, pronunciation, and grammar” (48). By contrast, Deutsch concludes that middle-class white students “are more likely to have been continually prodded intellectually by his parents and rewarded for correct answers” (33). These sweeping generalizations undergirded the intellectual positions of theorists such as Deutsch, Jensen, Bereiter, and Engleman during the mid-century dialectic regarding linguistic variance and as scholar Stephen Parks notes, “represent African American culture as a degraded culture” (79).

The pervasive nature of scientific racism advocated by psychologists including Deutsch in 1963 and 1967, and Bereiter and Engelmann in 1966, were helpful in perpetuating the myth of African American linguistic and genetic inferiority that helped to stigmatize the non-prestige dialect common to many African Americans. Harkening back to a time in which some members of the scientific community enthusiastically embraced eugenics, one reviewer of Deutsch’s text Social Class, Race and Development states the author’s conclusion that “present Negro and white intelligence differentials primarily reflect environmental differences” (Lauer 129). Late mid-century scientific theories based on concepts that noise in the home, assumptions that meaningful communicative exchanges between parent and child were infrequent, and that most African Americans lived in a state of crowded squalor amplified cognitive deficit theories
that supported explanations for the difference in a Black student’s speech and that of her instructors. Positioning AAL in this manner also underscored the assertion that linguistic differences were class-based, especially when contrasted with “standard English” and its middle-class association.

However, Smitherman counters the assertions of Deutsch, Bereiter, and Engelmann with a practical explanation of the Black dialect: the near-total isolation imposed upon African Americans due to the prevalent nature of Jim Crow segregationist practices (Smitherman, “Black Power” 86). Smitherman writes: “The systematic patterns that comprise Black English can be located historically in residual Africanisms, Southern regionalisms, and archaic Old Englishisms (“Black Power” 86). Similarly, McDavid, writing in 1951, notes that African Americans, “as the only large group of the American population who came here against their will” suffered the intentional denial of their cultural heritage as a condition of chattel slavery (5). Following slavery, McDavid notes, a “racially imposed caste system” that also discouraged support of African heritage supplanted the peculiar institution as a way of sustaining the myth of slavery’s “benefit” to its victims’ heirs (5).

Smitherman goes on to state that the sociological implications of imposed segregation further isolated African Americans from the mainstream of language change which, in effect, “produced separate but equal dialects” (Smitherman, “Black Power” 86). Inverting the power dynamic inherent in accusations of AAL’s alleged inferiority to “standard English,” Smitherman instead views AAL as a valuable linguistic asset offering verbal dexterity through speaking habits such as “signifying,” or verbal jousting through “playing the dozens” common to the dialect (Lefever 73). Language, for Smitherman, “is
the basic instrument of social reality . . . Black language, though often superciliously termed ‘non-standard English’ contains as much power, complexity, and usefulness as other varieties of American English, including the so-called “standard idiom” (Black Power” 88). Baugh writes that as late as 1954, “the majority of the Black population [could] retrace[d] their ancestry to Africans who had once been enslaved,” and efforts to close educational achievement gaps between Blacks and whites were not aggressively pursued (660). Recognizing that “a combination of social, linguistic, legal, and educational impediments” rather than so-called “scientific” explanations were attributable to differences in Black and white speech paved the way for pedagogical theories to help students gain facility with the dominant discourse (Baugh 660).

New Curriculum for a New Generation

Respect lay at the heart of successfully transitioning students who were invited but not necessarily welcomed into the newly desegregated educational environment of the early nineteen-sixties. Respect took two distinct forms—respect for a student’s language and her culture through adopting a more Afro-centric curriculum in the nascent days of integration. Banks writes:

College teachers must also realize the new militant black student will not sit by passively and let the curriculum remain lily white. If change is not initiated within English departments, black students will call professors to the bargaining table and demand curriculum reform. Such incidences have occurred in a number of urban universities. They have been rather embarrassing to professors. (295)

Banks’ ominous tone engenders the need for radical and sweeping change in college English classrooms, and the rising influence of the student-led Black Power movement.
Banks additionally calls for composition teachers to be mindful of their responsibility to all students, including those of African American descent. He states: “The college teacher of composition … has a responsibility to understand the structure of the black student’s language . . . to initially reject a black student’s writing is . . . to stifle his motivation to succeed in our colleges and to deflate his self concept” (296). While acknowledging the structural components of AAL, Banks contributes to the growing awareness of the conflation of language and identity. Calling for post secondary instructors to alter their attitudes to adjust to the changing culture, Banks recognizes education as a vehicle through which racial tensions might be mitigated. He asserts:

If college teachers are to help the black student in his new identity quest, facilitate his academic achievement and help halt the mounting racial crisis in our cities, it is imperative that they modify their attitudes and expectations for black youth and perpetuate an image of the Negro in the curriculum which is consistent with his contributions to American life. (296)

Banks called for recognition of Negritude as a condition worthy of distinction, not disdain.

One linguist in particular, Beryl Loftman Bailey, added her voice to the growing number of Black scholars who called for recognition of the role of linguistics in developing facility with language of wider communication (LWC). Acknowledged as the first Black female linguist, Jamaican-born Bailey was among the early advocates of contrastive analysis between home dialect and LWC in English instruction. Bailey found her approach particularly advantageous to students living in underserved minority

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22 Capitalization is original to Banks throughout this paragraph.
communities. Concentrating upon the similarities, rather than the differences between LWC and AAL, Bailey argued in her 1968 essay, “Some Aspects of the Impact of Linguistics on Language Teaching in Disadvantaged Communities,” for a more effective approach to teaching writing skills other than “traditional” approaches long advocated by rule-driven prescriptivists. Regarding the use of “traditional” grammar drills, she emphatically argues: “The tragedy is that so many [students] remain unaffected by present classroom procedures” (575). Because Bailey’s research on emerging freshmen at Mississippi’s Tougaloo College indicated that “formal training in correct usage and extensive exposure to formal texts have not produced high school graduates with a facile and confident use of language,” she stressed the need for language instruction that better prepared students who, by virtue of their habitus23, were immersed in the local “dialectal substratum” of their home community, and subsequently placed at a disadvantage by virtue of their exclusive facility with a non-prestige dialect (575). Bailey saw a need to ameliorate the difficulties students from marginalized communities experienced with “standard English” through the use of techniques that were a departure from those used in the past. Illustrating her keen dislike of prescriptive pedagogy in writing instruction, she notes that “Unfortunately, most of us are not really willing to give up some of our most cherished practices and beliefs. We have long since discredited the teaching of grammar as the means of teaching written language, although we now know that a knowledge of the structures of the language is one of the best ways of assuring proficiency in its use” (578).

Although Gilyard identifies Williamson as among the first to initiate contrastive analysis in composition pedagogy, Smitherman attributes Bailey as one of the first English educators to initiate the “linguistic method” for African American speakers. Bailey’s pedagogy employed her knowledge of linguistics as a science based on “objective observation” of the natural structure of language, rather than “rules of an earlier era” (Smitherman, “African American Language and Education” 551). During a new era of desegregation, Bailey asserts, “as Negro communities . . . are to be brought fully into the mainstream of American life, then they [students] must be equipped with the linguistic tools for such participation” (571). From this springboard, Bailey was among the early pioneers who demanded a reconsideration of prescriptive pedagogical methodologies and their effectiveness for a culture deep in the throes of dramatic social change.

From the purview of the twenty-first century, it seems difficult to imagine the appalling lack of diversity in college classrooms in the mid-nineteen-sixties. To contextualize the demographic of a typical state school in the nineteen-sixties, English scholar Leonard Greenbaum, also writing in 1968, states that by 1965, only 207,316, (or less than five percent) of 4.5 million American collegians were African American (307). Of this number of Black students, Greenbaum notes, more than half attended Negro colleges, “leaving 100,000 Negro students scattered among nearly 4.5 million whites or a ratio of one to forty-three in a country where every tenth man is a Negro” (Greenbaum 307). The percentage of Black faculty members at state colleges was also profoundly stark; in 1968, twelve out of 2,200 University of Michigan faculty members were Black.
Greeenbaum writes of these statistics, “The University of Michigan’s examples are unfortunately, everybody’s examples” (308).

Through their presence and their persistence, however, these students and faculty members helped to shape college writing instruction for generations to come by altering the perception that dialectal differences which contrasted with so-called “standard” English were not “sub-standard,” but different. The primary means of persuasive dialogue came through the dialectic exchange carried out through the various publications serving the English and linguistic professionals standing in front of college writing classrooms.

The perspectives contained within journals for the English profession including *College English*, *College Composition and Communication* and the *CLA Journal* are particularly representative of the professional dialogue leading up to the eventual adoption of SRTOL Resolution as discussed in Chapter Two (“Carriers of the Rhetoric-Composition Conversation” 11). Within the pages of NCTE’s flagship publications for college composition, *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) and *College English*, the push/pull of the arguments centering on the challenges and dilemmas college English instructors encountered during a time of profound social upheaval live forever in library stacks and cyberspace. Scholar Thomas Huckin ascribes the importance scholars give to the voices clamoring within these journals, writing twenty years after the adoption of SRTOL:

> These, our sanctioned spaces, shape what gets said and how it gets said, and determine whose ideas get privileged at any given historical moment. The preparation of scholarly manuscripts, editorial policies and the peer review process, and the
expectations of journal editors “signal a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology. (115)

As Richard Lloyd-Jones attests in “Writing the Resolution: An Institutional History,” the confluence of social undercurrents, a renewed interest in rhetoric, and the influence of linguistic science combined to dramatically affect the teaching of college composition. Lloyd-Jones asserts that “by the mid-sixties, a fair number of composition teachers were seeking approaches that honored aptness more than correctness” which was resultant of rhetoric and linguistic-oriented studies that “led to greater concerns for contexts in speech and writing” (3). Lloyd-Jones’s observation of the role of context in studies of language underscores the increasing influence of linguistics in composition instruction and the gradual move away from formalism toward a socio-linguistic conception of writing and speech. This progression is reflective of the evolution of attitudes regarding language in what Lloyd-Jones describes as “changing in response to the social and political environment” and the growing influence of linguists ranging from Bloomfield, Baugh, Fries, and Leonard whose theories were “creeping down to the regular faculty, if not to the world at large” (Lloyd-Jones 3-4).

Professional societies such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC or 4C’s) debated ways to address the social inequities that members witnessed in their increasingly diverse classrooms. By the mid-sixties, Lloyd-Jones notes, “there had been sit-ins, and marches, and murders in sufficient numbers to make clear that issues of oppression and power had to be settled, and language was an emblem of that oppression” (Lloyd-Jones 5). As Smitherman affirms, the Black Power movement as manifested by Rosa Parks’s refusal to move to the back of the bus was in
essence, “a bold call for new directions and strategies that led to the unleashing of Brown Power, Woman Power, Poor People’s Power, Gay Power, and other human energy sources that fundamentally altered American power relations in our time” (“Students’ Right” 21). Smitherman recounts that the call for change catalyzed by the Black Power movement spurred “progressive academics” to work within their societies and organizations to “bring about mainstream recognition and legitimacy” not only to the language of the dispossessed, but respect for their history and culture as well (“Students’ Right” 21). Through the efforts of organizations ranging from the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, the Modern Language Association, the Speech Communication Association, and the American Bar Association, Smitherman notes that marginalized groups such as Hispanics, Native Americans, and women joined African Americans in seeking to “redress ages-old grievances against an exploitative system” (“Students’ Right” 22). Public demonstrations of unrest, a hallmark of the modern civil rights movement, were carried out in acts of civil disobedience ranging from boycotts, marches, sit-ins, and protests—all in an effort to highlight a growing resistance to the status quo. Media attention given to the various urban uprisings expanded white America’s awareness of “dimensions of Black Language and Black Culture that for centuries had been hidden from White public view” (Smitherman, “African American Language and Education” 548).

During the time period shortly before the 1968 assassination of King, Kynard observes that the “fields of composition-rhetoric and linguistics advocated the legitimacy of all language variations alongside the social inadequacies of nonstandard forms” (“I

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24Capitalization original to Smitherman.
Want to be African” 361). The realities of many colleges’ open enrollment policies and the presence of Black students in formerly all-white college classrooms imposed cultural and linguistic diversity upon institutions and set the stage for the backdrop of politics to collide with the personal over language rights.

**Black Power, Black Language and the Blackest Day: The “Murder of the American Dream”**

The convergence of years of frustration rooted in the exclusion of Blacks from leadership roles in organizations for English professionals combined with emerging societal tensions entrenched in race and class differences suddenly and unintentionally became the focus of the 1968 CCCC Convention in Minneapolis. As word spread of King’s Memphis assassination on April 4th, Lloyd-Jones records that “the second day of the Convention was put aside for the discussion of the implications of his murder” (3). As a participant in the 1968 CCCC Minneapolis Convention, Ernece B. Kelly decided she could bear the mantle of silence no more and used the opportunity to use the CCCC’s own platform to rebuke the organization for its collective insouciance toward Black scholars, Black Language, and Black participation on issues facing composition instructors of Black students. In her condemnation of the treatment of Black academicians, Kelly states, “I didn’t come to this Conference\textsuperscript{25} as a Black woman. I came as an English instructor with a curiosity and interest in methodology” (107). Kelly writes that as the conference wore on, she “had to grow blacker as I realized the awful blind spots which prevented some whites here from seeing Blacks as humans who could contribute to a conference or a classroom” (107). Kelly’s puissant essay called for an end

\textsuperscript{25} The punctuation and capitalization are original to Ernece Kelly.
to “tokenism” that functioned as thinly-veiled prejudice in academic circles (107). She expressed her disdain for the objectification she felt as “an ornament in professional or academic groups, the object to be changed, reshaped, made over” as a minority person in a room full of whites (108). But perhaps Kelly’s most poignant call was in regard to Black language and the racism she found inherent in repeated calls by some composition instructors to replace the dialects of their Black students. Kelly demanded that compositionists work to become sensitive to their own prejudices to “find out where racism touches you” (107). She then pleaded for conference participants to “work, really work to undo the damage you may have done in trying to reshape the Black student in your own image” (107). Between the 1968 assassination of the civil rights movement’s most prominent leader, rising frustrations over the paucity of Black leadership in professional teaching organizations, and the lack of Black voices contributing to polemics concerning African American language and literature, tensions rapidly approached a tipping point.

The CCCC responded to Kelly’s call by publishing her “Murder of the American Dream” essay in College Composition and Communication’s (CCC) May 1968 issue, which at the time had approximately 4,500 members. In addition, Kelly was invited to co-edit a special edition of CCC on the subject “Intergroup Relations in the Teaching of English” in the December 1968 issue. Editor William Irmscher notes in the special issue’s “Table of Contents” the CCCC’s munificence in including “four Black writers among the contributors” (277). Perhaps the most striking response leading to avenues of acceptance for the plurality of dialects was Richard Braddock’s impassioned letter to Martin Luther King’s widow. The April 8 letter, published in the October 1968 issue,
came on the heels of the Minneapolis four C’s convention and Kelly’s stirring admonition against the “racist sickness” affecting its membership (Braddock 239). Braddock’s letter to Coretta Scott King included a statement of contrition and solidarity from Program Chairman Wallace Douglas that was read at a memorial service for King at the Minneapolis convention. It stated, “For the many purposes we share with his life and mission, the Conference on College Composition and Communication wishes to rededicate itself and, through its teachers, to rededicate our students to the ideals so eloquently expressed by the life of Martin Luther King” (Braddock 239).

Braddock, who attached $685.05 in receipts collected at the Minneapolis convention for King’s widow, wrote of the shame the CCCC membership collectively felt at the sudden realization of the “self righteous” move in insisting upon unsegregated accommodations where we held our conventions” (239). Braddock confesses the recent discovery that “we have been hurting ourselves . . . by not utilizing the rich resources of our Negro members we have not known well” (239). Finally, Braddock concludes the letter by admitting the absurdity of excluding Black members from contributing to the rising dialogue regarding issues of Black English and the research attending the subject. Braddock confesses, “Some of our studies of dialects have made serious errors when white investigators have neglected to consult their Negro colleagues for assistance in planning, conducting, and interpreting research,” adding that steps are being implemented to broaden Black representation for the purpose of “improving the teaching of composition everywhere” (239). Indeed, the blatant oversight of African American scholars in contributing to the growing conversation regarding pedagogical issues specific to Black students was an especially egregious slight, particularly since Black
educators had vastly more experience in teaching marginalized students than their white counterparts.

Subsequent to King’s assassination, the fruition of social movements advocating an end to academic injustices experienced by marginalized groups including Blacks, women, non-traditional students and returning veterans successfully raised awareness of the need to develop “basic-writing” courses to meet the needs of the “new” student, who came not from a background of white privilege, but from a different culture, race, and class. Sarah Webster Fabio offered her definition of Black language in the 1968 special issue of CCC on “Intergroup Relations in the Teaching of English.” Fabio’s definition captures the rhetorical perspicacity of Black dialect. She writes: “Black language is direct, creative, intelligent communication between black people based on a shared reality, awareness, understanding which generates interaction; it is a rhetoric which places premium on imagistic renderings and concretizations of abstractions, poetic usages of language, idiosyncrasies . . . which ‘hit home’ and evoke truth” (286). Fabio’s definition captures the elements of identity and community that are characteristic of Black language, and her definition focuses on its strengths rather than its perceived weaknesses.

Just as it appeared the CCCC leadership was beginning to take notice of issues relative to linguistic and political discrimination within its ranks, the 1969 CCCC Convention in Miami Beach gave Black scholars additional reason for outrage. Gilyard notes of the Miami convention: “Some African Americans were appalled by specious scholarship concerning Blacks on display at the 1969 CCCC convention in Miami Beach” (“African American Contributions” 365). By the late 1960s, Black English had
become a topic of emerging interest; as such, white scholars seized upon the interest in the topic and began publishing books and articles concerning its legitimacy and pedagogical practices concerning its inclusion or its amelioration. James Sledd, who was also instrumental in the adoption of the NCTE’s Resolution Number Five, writes in 1969: “Black English provided the most lucrative, new industry for white linguists, who found the mother lode when they discovered the interesting locutions which the less protected employ to the detriment of their chances of upward mobility” (1308). Darwin Turner offers a partial explanation for the dearth of publications authored by Black scholars during the late nineteen-sixties. In his President’s report to the CLA convention in 1965, Turner observed that “more white scholars than black ones were interested in literature by blacks and that the most recent criticism of novels by blacks and the most recent anthology of literature by blacks were published by whites” (272). Turner poignantly asks a rhetorical question: “Where are our scholars?” He then responds, “Buried under a hundred freshman compositions” (Turner as quoted in R. Brooks 272). While the CLA affirmed the rising interest in “the Black Experience,” its leadership also implored its predominately Black institutions to “move swiftly to equalize the conditions of employment with that of comparable institutions” (Davis 12). Davis recalls, “Teachers in the predominately Black institutions have labored under the disadvantages of low salaries, heavy class loads, excessive committee and extra-curricular responsibilities, and limited professional recognition,” all of which conspired to curtail the opportunity to research and publish at a time in which the voices of Black scholars most needed to be heard (12). African American literature specialist A. Russell Brooks reiterates the difficulties instructors in predominately Black institutions faced. Quoting CLA member
Herman Bostick at the society’s Jackson, Mississippi Convention, Russell writes of HBCU English faculty: “[they] find themselves in classrooms crowded with students who are not only ill-equipped to perform in Standard\textsuperscript{26} English, but who are often antagonistic or indifferent to the study of language or to the improvement or their use of it” (Bostick as quoted in R. Brooks 272).

The status of composition instructors at HBCUs was yet another issue that merited the drafting and approval of three statements at the College Language Association’s twenty-ninth annual convention in the spring of 1969. The triad of statements issued by the CLA concerned the status of teachers laboring in predominately Black institutions, a statement to publishers regarding “colonialist attitudes” within the publishing industry, and a statement affirming an interest in Black Studies programs (Davis 14-16). Echoing the resentment of the texts containing “specious scholarship” on display at the 1969 CCCC Miami Convention, the CLA statement addressed the “many books now appearing that have been prepared by ‘instant experts’” attributable to “the surge of interest in Black people in the United States” (Davis 14). The CLA statement decries “the apparent ease with which ill-conceived programs, directed by persons with limited experience with Black people and their history and often prompted by questionable academic and social motives seem to receive ready approval” (Davis 13). Davis writes that in the rush to “redress an imbalance of which we are the most direct witness,” Black faculty and the institutions they represent are “being by-passed” in the rush to be published (13).

\textsuperscript{26} Capitalization original to A. Russell Brooks.
Many published articles dealt with the issue of the legitimacy of Black dialect and proposed bi-dialectalism, now referred to as “code-switching” as a viable alternative to the eradication of a student’s home dialect. Greenbaum writes in his 1968 *College Composition and Communication* essay, “Prejudice and Purpose”: “Dialect has positive aspects . . . that are not part of standardized English . . . The desire to eliminate dialect is an egocentric solution proposed out of power and out of traditional modes of education” (305). Bi-dialectalism, or code-switching between “standard English” and Black English offered African American students the means to alternate between the language of their home environment and that of the status quo. The “benefit” of which, according to linguist William Stewart, is “the potential of the Negro to be identical to white Americans” (Stewart as quoted in Sledd 1309). Linguist William Labov also notes the advantages of assimilation into the dialect of the status quo when he writes, “since the homes of many lower class and working people do not provide the pressures toward upward social mobility that middle-class homes provide . . . [we must] build into the community a tolerance for style shifting which is helpful in educational and occupational advancement . . . [to build] a tolerance for practice in second role playing” (Labov 94-97 passim). Labov, Sledd, Stewart, and Williamson, among many other scholars, recognized the linguistic capital of LWC, and the inherent duality it represented in adopting an identity via “second role playing.” Statements such as these penned in the late nineteen-sixties by Labov, Sledd, Stewart, and Williamson illustrate the tremendous controversy regarding Black English and its place in the academy alongside LWC.

Arguments regarding the place of “standard” English alongside dialects of nurture illuminated issues that were consuming the larger culture even as societal hierarchies
were renegotiated. In his eloquent 1969 College English essay, “Bi-dialectalism: the Linguistics of White Supremacy,” Sledd argues that teaching students that their own dialect is culturally inferior is essentially a hegemonic enterprise. Sledd writes, “The basic assumption of bi-dialectalism is that the prejudices of middle-class whites cannot be changed but must be accepted and indeed enforced on lesser breeds” (1309). Sledd goes on to assert that an insistence upon bi-dialectalism in the interest of helping students obtain upward mobility is “the pillar upon which the state is built, and the compassionate teacher, knowing the ways of his society, will change the color of his students’ vowels although he cannot change the color of their skins” (1312). Sledd views bi-dialectalism as an invitation for students to enter into “the world of hypercorrection, insecurity and ‘linguistic self-hatred,’” and in many ways exemplifies white prejudice against linguistic differences such as so-called nonstandard dialects found in Southern speech or Black dialect (1309).

Ironically, the arguments regarding the place of African Americans and their language in mid-century college classrooms eerily echo the post-slavery concern regarding the matriculation of African Americans into mainstream white society—a dilemma unfortunately termed the “Negro problem.” But the “problem” brought on by dialectal variance highlighted by the Black/white binary might have inadvertently rescued the discipline of linguistics from languishing in its quest of universal, “invariant rules and deep abstract structure” at the expense of theoretical concerns (Shuy 297). Roger Shuy maintains that in “wandering far from real language use in real life contexts,” linguistics as a discipline came to a period of stasis in the mid-sixties (298). Chapter Two notes the value of a historical perspective in better understanding language as a living, evolving
A conception of language as something that is congruous with the culture using it, frees it from the prescriptive binary of “good” English, and “bad” English.

Shuy writes that in the mid-sixties, funding agencies such as the United States Office of Education, the Ford Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation undertook research on social dialects with the ostensible goal of seeking ways of improving the condition of Black children in ghettos. However, Shuy argues, “it was little imagined what long range implications such studies might have on education and linguistics in this country” (297). Just as linguistics provided a scientific basis that assisted the field of composition studies in legitimizing the discipline through research, in the mid-sixties, the discipline of composition offered linguistics the opportunity “for academic respectability of theory if it was to survive as an academic field” (Shuy 298). Asserting that linguistics faced a crisis rooted in an understanding that “the more we learned about the universals of language, the less likely it was that a grammar could be written,” the field of linguistics faced a crossroads in which “speculative arguments over the best ways of deriving surface features for deep structure began to take on the appearance of academic game playing” (Shuy 298). The result was a growing lack of interest among members of the Linguistic Society of America, who out of disinterest in their own field, turned to other avenues to “give their papers at more congenial and specialized meetings” (Shuy 298). Adding to the perceived stasis in the field of linguistics, Shuy points to the rising interest in “urban languages” which helped to instantiate the theory that “past [linguistic] methodologies were no longer viable” (299). Shuy attributes the drift in Linguistic Society of America membership from a focus upon broader concerns for language, such
as its psychological, historical, social, educational and geographical, to an almost entirely theoretical emphasis (298). Black English offered interdisciplinary approaches for linguistic research that in turn, could rejuvenate the field. Shuy chronicles analyses of Black English made in the late nineteen-sixties primarily by white linguists including William Labov, Walt Wolfram, William Stewart, Joey Dillard, and Ralph Fasold (300). However, Black scholars attacked these studies on the basis that “whites can never know how Black English really works, [and] this is just another case of whites trying to belittle or hold back Blacks by calling attention to weakness rather than strength, that not all Blacks talk that way or that white analysts have improper or self serving motives for studying (exploiting) Blacks” (Shuy 300). As noted earlier, the rise in “instant experts” in the subject of Black English was a source of great contention among Black scholars in and outside of the Black Caucus (Davis 14).

The rising interest in urban language that began during the mid-sixties illustrates the complementary nature of linguistics and composition pedagogy. Just as linguistics augmented composition pedagogy through validating the discipline through an alliance with research and science, Black Vernacular English proved to be fertile ground for new linguistics research because of the variability of Black English and its usefulness for study. According to Shuy, “linguists who had been interested in language variation as it is found in the creolization and pidginization of language also began to apply their knowledge to urban social dialect, particularly the urban, northern Black” (299). Black English made an alluring study because it “provided important historical backgrounds for language change and offer[ed] analytical insights” through the beauty of its variability (Shuy 299). Furthermore, Shuy notes, Black English was an interesting avenue for study
from a psychological point of view: “behavioral psychologists thought that language embodied attitudes and cognitive psychologists thought it inferred them” (299). The many facets of Black English made it an interdisciplinary gold mine for study. Shuy asserts, “Everything seemed ripe for this focus on Black English except for one thing—nobody in the academic world knew very much about it” (299). Black English—its origins speculative, its prestige questioned—gave rise to the instant “experts” that so infuriated the Black CCCC members at the 1969 Miami Convention and ultimately led to the adoption of Resolution Number Five, a precursor to STROL.

Although the CCCCs, a NCTE constituent group, appeared poised to move toward significant changes in the wake of the 1968 Minneapolis Convention and its aftermath, the organization’s irresolute response drew well-deserved ire from Black members at the 1970 CCCC Convention in Seattle. In spite of Darwin T. Turner’s involvement in the drafting and adoption of NCTE Resolution Number Five, full participation of Black CCCC members remained only a hope. Marianna Davis writes, “No African Americans were invited to deliver papers or serve as respondents [at the 1970 Seattle Convention]. In fact, only a few were invited to serve as recorders, menial roles, to say the least” (9). Emboldened by peaceful protests of the civil rights movement, Davis notes that Black CCCC members united in protest against sessions “where White27 professors were badly handling the subject matter of Black literature and Black language patterns” (9). Following the disruption, fifteen Black CCCC members met and officially formed the Black Caucus to “focus on the problem of helping all college students to understand fundamental concepts of meaningful writing” (Davis 11). Using the three

27 Capitalization is original to Davis.
Statements approved by the CLA at its twenty-ninth annual convention in 1969 as a template, the Black Caucus urged the CCCC to adopt the same statements for its organization in order to improve working conditions at Black institutions, increase the publication of Black authored texts, and continue to incorporate Black Studies in departmental curricula. This resolution came to be known as the “Seattle Resolution” which substantiated the grave disappointment Black scholars had with their diminished role in the organization, which Gilyard argues ultimately “bore fruit” at CCCC annual meetings in 1971 and 1972 (“African American” 636). Black college English teachers were eager to engage in scholarly collaboration regarding the challenges of teaching struggling writers.

Struggling writers at mid-century were identified as those in need of remediation. Although “remedial” writing, the term commonly used before the late twentieth century, has long been a mainstay of college English departments, the need for “basic writing” instruction is not confined to a particular race; Harvard’s concern for its underprepared writers ushered in the era of standardized testing for college preparedness as early as the late nineteenth century. In other words, it is a fallacy to conflate race with inadequate writing skills. However, as Jacqueline Jones Royster notes, “the impact of persistent oppression” that is historically consistent with the American Black experience is more of a predictable consequence than is a correlation between race and poor writing performance (“History” 571). Royster points to Mina Shaughnessey’s popular 1977 text Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing to highlight that nineteen-sixties-era protests—ranging from anti-Vietnam demonstrations to veterans and women’s rights—created an atmosphere conducive to colleges and universities creating
open admission policies, thereby “admitting students who may not have been ready for college” (570). The changing dynamics of the student population produced diversity in the writing classroom that the academy had never before seen, and gave writing instructors a variety of race, class, and culture with which to work.

While compositionists grappled with the task of helping their varied student population develop facility with LWC, many Black students were drawn to the message of Black power and the move toward an acceptance of the culture long impugned by the establishment. Consequently, some Black students questioned the relevance of strict adherence to “standard English,” opting instead to embrace their heritage and vestiges of it through AAL. In so doing, students enacted a type of linguistic activism that was at its core a political statement. African American Studies specialist Marcyliena Morgan argues that AAL has long been an act of resistance against the status quo and has its roots in slavery. In arguing that AAL is a counterlanguage that functions as an act of subversion and covert communication, Morgan states: “It [AAL] may not have survived and been adapted were it not for dominant Southern society’s relentless monitoring of African American’s communication and language. Irrespective of the reason for its continued significance in African American interactions, the counterlanguage is the foundation of all African American discourse” (25). Morgan argues that particularly during the civil rights struggles of the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen seventies, “African American counterlanguage . . . functioned to signal the anti-society and provided a means to reveal a social face that resisted and contested the practice of race-based repression” (24). For Morgan, African American language imbues the speaker with political and symbolic agency borne of resistance. Stephen Schneider argues that
understanding the historical context that informs a counterlanguage perspective of AAL enables an appreciation of it “not as an imperfect or deficient version of ‘correct English’ but rather a rhetorical agency that enables resistant political action” (58).

**Conclusion**

Deep societal conflicts such as that which characterized much of the late nineteen-sixties to the early nineteen-seventies have the benefit of offering up interstitial spaces through which cultural norms are questioned, rejected, and then sometimes reordered. Contestations such as those highlighted in this chapter bring the importance of these issues to bear upon those whose language, identity, and by inference—skin color and class—were not typically the objects of scorn, highlighting the incompatibility of institutional prejudice with libertarian ideals of democratized higher education.

In sum, the arguments over the legitimacy and the place for Black English exposed the white spaces within composition studies and demanded some sort of resolution. Two approaches to the “problem” of linguistic diversity advocated by scholars—erradicationism and bidialectalism, offered no satisfactory compromise in bridging the cultural and social divide between LWC and AAL. Erradicationism, clearly a racist solution, was impractical. Bidialectalism also smacked of racism and was considered by many scholars from Shuy, Sledd, and Smitherman to Gilyard as an imperfect alternative. Bidialectalism, known interchangeably as code-switching, is, according to Vershawn Young, “a strategy whereby black students are taught contrastive analysis—a method of comparing black English to standard English so they can learn to switch from one to the other in different settings” (51). Code-switching

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28 Punctuation in this quote is Young’s.
pedagogy, though nameless at the time, found early advocacy through late nineteen fifties-era scholars such as Williamson. However, twenty-first century scholars including Gilyard and Young argue that code-switching promotes a type of DuBoisian “linguistic double-consciousness” for speakers of AAL. Though code-switching appears to be an egalitarian compromise allowing “black students to have their racial identity and speak it too,” Young argues that it is tantamount to the logic behind “separate but equal” Jim Crow legislation (53).

In other words, that dog won’t hunt.

The most reasonable solution in addressing the challenges brought about through student diversity was the cultivation of an appreciation for linguistic and cultural plurality by instructors in the college English classroom. This change in a teacher attitude toward students whose language of nurture is different from so-called “correct English” became the impetus for the drafting of the SRTOL Resolution, which is the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

Students’ Right to Their Own Language: Reality and Retrospective

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 to Their Own Language Resolution, passed by the Conference on College Composition Executive Committee in 1972, and its membership in 1974.

Writing in *College English* in 1979, English teacher John Rouse asserts in his essay, “The Politics of Composition”: “Of all school subjects, English is surely the most controversial. How the young should be instructed in their use of language is an issue that agitates multitudes, for language learning is the process by which a child comes to acquire a specific social identity” (1). Rouse effectively summarizes the tumult encompassing the passage of the SRTOL Resolution five years prior in 1974; his quotation hints at the intersection of politics, passion, and policy that this chapter demonstrates in the development and adoption of arguably one of the most recognized statements proffered by the Conference on College Composition and Communication on the subject of college composition pedagogy.

Standing as a place mark in composition history, the Students’ Right to Their Own Language Resolution denotes a point at which politics collided uneasily with pedagogy in the early nineteen-seventies, attesting to Rouse’s assertion that the act of “making an English program becomes . . . not simply an educational venture but a political act” (1). Against a backdrop of profound socio-cultural changes, SRTOL stood
as tangible effort by the Conference on College Composition and Communication to advance linguistic plurality in an increasingly diverse American society. The brief position statement was crafted in an attempt to cut across the grain of racial and class-based inequities and “charges compositionists to commit to equality in the classroom” in an effort to resist linguistic discrimination (Bruch and Marback viii). As Richard Larson writes in his preface to the Resolution in 1974, the SRTOL statement directly confronts a pressing problem facing teachers of composition and communication of the era: “how to respond to variety in their students’ dialects (“To Readers of CCC”). Spurred by Black academic activists such as Ernece Kelly, James Banks, Geneva Smitherman, and Mariana Davis, these and a host of other progressive scholars sought linguistic justice in combating hegemonic undertones embodied in language practices in the college writing classroom that came to the fore following the desegregation. Although dialectal differences are a constant in any heterogeneous society, during the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, minority demands for social justice pushed American educators to formulate ways of redressing inequities inherent in the complicated relationship between language and identity relative to composition pedagogy. As educators wrestled with how best to deal with the linguistic habits of students who came from non-privileged backgrounds, questions regarding the ideology inherent in language practices surfaced, leading to a 1972 decision by the CCCC to draft a position statement in the form of SRTOL to guide college English teachers in the matter. At the same time, the Resolution offered a means by which the CCCC could attempt to clarify some of its own internal positions regarding issues, including the legitimacy of dialects considered “non-standard.” As Smitherman recalls, “it was clear that the charge to intellectual-
activists was to struggle for the wider social legitimacy of all languages and dialects and to struggle . . . to bring about mainstream recognition and acceptance of the culture, history, and language of those on the margins” (“CCCC’s Role” 358). While a comprehensive analysis of the SRTOL Resolution is taken up elsewhere in detail through a variety of excellent texts, the ratification of SRTOL is an important waypoint toward the acceptance of dialectal diversity, and is, as Smitherman points out, “a major paradigm shift in higher education, itself the result of a major paradigm shift in the social order” (“CCCC’s Role” 364). Furthermore, the 1974 adoption of SRTOL by the CCCC membership sent a clear signal of the academy’s attempt to confront the challenges of an increasingly diverse society head on through political involvement.

The debates discussed in the previous chapter leading up to the drafting of the SRTOL Resolution reveal that unequivocal support for SRTOL by CCCC membership was not a given. Anticipating controversy, the CCCC Executive Committee spent two years preparing an accompanying background document complete with a bibliography to explain the SRTOL statement, which was then published as a special issue of the CCC in September of 1974. Because debate surrounded SRTOL’s adoption, this chapter examines its proponents’ primary arguments for the Resolution in context with the arguments that informed the resistance of some scholars to join in advocacy for the SRTOL Resolution. The chapter then reassesses what—if anything—SRTOL actually changed nearly fifty years after its ratification.

29 For further information, see Class Politics: The Movement for the Students Right to Their Own Language by Stephen Parks; Students Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook by Staci Perryman Clark et al; and The Hope and the Legacy: The Past, the Present, and the Future of “Students Rights to their Own Language” by Patrick Bruch and Bruce Marback.
Background

The civil rights movement, with its multi-faceted, decades-long effort to change Americans’ viewpoint regarding the acceptability of apartheid, rested on the dream of changing perceptions in an effort to affect social reality. Charles J. Stewart et al., in *Persuasion and Social Movements*, write, “Social movements are intricate social dramas involving multiple scenes, acts, agents, agencies, and purposes”\(^{(30)}\) (85). Over its long and turbulent history, the civil rights movement embodied each element of Burke’s dramatic pentad. Various actors were engaged in multifarious acts and scenes of the movement that spanned many decades. During this time, the purposes of the civil rights efforts were manifested via agents who created agency through the dialectics of persuasion to slowly change American attitudes about racial inequality. Amended societal perceptions regarding race and diversity made it possible, for the first time in American history, for African American students to attend public colleges and universities during the latter part of the nineteen-sixties. However, the attempt at leveling the educational playing field exposed educational gaps created by the *Plessy v Ferguson* Supreme Court “separate but equal” doctrine that was ultimately overturned by *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954. Smitherman notes in her 2003 retrospective essay, “The Historical Struggle for Language Rights in CCCC,” that many minority students struggled with English composition, because “however bright, [they] did not have command of the grammar and conventions of academic discourse/‘standardized’ English” (19). What these students did have,

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Smitherman insists, were “other communicative strengths—creative ideas, logical and persuasive reasoning powers, innovative ways of talking about the ordinary and the mundane . . .” by virtue of their language of nurture, African American Language (AAL) (“Historical” 19).

The Conference on College Composition and Communication, a constituent group of National Committee on the Teaching of English, grew increasingly concerned about the developing crisis in American higher education—the class and cultural gaps between non-traditional students and their white counterparts. The presence of linguistically diverse students from lower socio-economic backgrounds presented challenges that college English faculty were unsure how to face. The CCCC, as an organization offering support to college English instructors, was called upon to provide much needed direction on the matter. Noting the “linguistic mismatch” between traditional students and those entering the university from non-privileged backgrounds, Smitherman argues that the SRTOL Resolution was neither politically correct nor trendy (“Historical” 19). Rather, the Resolution was a reaction—born of exigence—of the perceived problem of teaching diverse students the rudiments of English composition, a task complicated by philosophical considerations regarding the privileging of one version of English dialect (so called “standard” English) over anything else (typically AAL, and the racial considerations attending AAL dialect as discussed below). Smitherman and other activist leaders in the scholarly community became important actors in a rhetorical movement at which writing was central to the change in attitudes. As consequence of their activist roles, the SRTOL Resolution, I argue, represented a rhetorical movement in that the Resolution, as an artifact of writing—signaled a clear shift from prescriptive practices of
the past to linguistic pluralism of the present. Smitherman, in her involvement in SRTOL as a member of the CCCC committee appointed to draft policy regarding English instructors’ approach to students’ diverse dialects, recognized the Resolution as an indication of internalized change within the academy.

Smitherman’s retrospective account of the development of SRTOL describes the socio-cultural environment of the fall of 1971 as the policy was in its nascent days as a draft. Smitherman emphatically recalls, “The Enlightened were, after all, attempting to effectuate change WITHIN THE SYSTEM”31 (“Students’ Rights” 22). As the previous chapter details, the confluence of concurrent social movements and political events including the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Vietnam War resistance, civil rights, and women’s-rights protests affected long-held perspectives on language instruction, and laid the foundation for the reception of a Resolution directing compositionists on the approach to the complex and delicate matter of dialectal diversity in the college English classrooms. Bruch and Marback contend that the SRTOL Resolution was a symbol of the academy’s attempt to “endorse a controversial new vision of literacy education as an ethical and political project” (51). It was also a means through which the English profession might engage with the larger culture to implement social change through language instruction. This chapter maintains that the scholars on both sides of the SRTOL adoption were among the many who successfully pinpointed a profound lack of engagement between academe and the larger culture. The SRTOL Resolution consequently embodies a persuasive effort to resolve hegemonic practices in

31 Smitherman frequently uses all capitals for emphasis in her early publications.
writing instruction that were thinly veiled efforts to preserve the status quo through prescriptivism. Just as shifting perspectives were important in the remediation of prejudice exemplified in societal “norms” such as Jim Crow laws, a change in attitude also informed the rhetorical movement that is solidified in the SRTOL Resolution relative to instructor perception of the linguistically diverse student. Just as the civil rights movement called for a re-evaluation of the definition of equality for all Americans, the SRTOL Resolution was a response to the larger culture’s demand that academia respond to the exigence of the moment—through the vehicle of language. College composition instructors, as actors creating agency through a revised approach to writing pedagogy, increasingly recognized that the language of diverse students could no longer remain trapped inside the prescriptive binary of “good” or “bad” English based on a proximity to belletristic notions of taste. Rather, the SRTOL Resolution called upon English instructors to examine their own attitudes regarding the superiority of one dialect over another—and the potential that such a binary might create for a continued segregation of students based on the color of their language, instead of the color of their skins.

While many compositionists were eager to implement a more progressive cultural ethos in their college English classrooms through SRTOL, the Resolution did not enjoy full support. In a review of many of the English profession’s journals of the era, ambivalence is scarce; opinions regarding the Resolution are impassioned and vocal, essentially divided solidly between SRTOL supporters and detractors. Bruch and Marback observe that scholarly conversations regarding SRTOL “tended to revolve around either-or dichotomies that constructed opposing views in polemical terms” (51). Bruch and Marback detail that apart from a “larger public struggle over the meanings of
equality, difference, and racial justice in the United States, the SRTOL resolution\textsuperscript{32} was met with confusion and even disdain” (51). Stephen Parks, author of \textit{Class Politics: The Movement for The Students’ Right to Their Own Language} reiterates the point, writing in 2005, “There seemed to be no middle ground” (216). In an example of the pervasiveness of the aforementioned binary, Lou Kelly states: “Teachers who cling to their obsession with grammar are not serving the student or the system; they are preserving the notion that, though all men are created equal, the language you learn in the home and community where you are created stamps you inferior if it is not ‘correct’” (255). The arguments offered in support of a departure from prescriptivism offered by Kelly and Juanita Williamson were effective in advancing the CCCC membership toward adoption of SRTOL, although Williamson strongly opposed the Resolution.

\textbf{SRTOL: Williamson and Beyond}

As the CCCC struggled to provide direction to college English instructors relative to issues of dialect and the changing demographics of their classrooms, workshop reports from the CCCC’s national convention reveal the intricacies of a discipline grappling with the complex socio-cultural issues of the late nineteen-sixties. At the 1968 CCCC annual convention in Minneapolis (during which Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis and Ernecce Kelly made her impassioned speech)\textsuperscript{33}, Panel Nine took up the issue of Dialect Studies and Social Values in their likewise named session. The “Workshop Report” is valuable in contextualizing the central arguments that informed the SRTOL Resolution that CCCC would draft four years later. Panel Nine details the

\textsuperscript{32} I prefer to capitalize “Resolution” in context with SRTOL. Others, such as Bruch and Marbach, do not.

\textsuperscript{33} Ernecce Kelly’s speech in discussed in detail in Chapter Five of this dissertation.
problems the committee faced in addressing the language issues that were accompanying the move toward a more homogenous society following *Brown v Board of Education*. Noting that the meeting began with “preliminary wandering . . . that gradually took shape, . . . the focus never became clear and narrow . . . but we kept returning to the basic issues that developed early in our first session,” it is clear that their discussion, which was “mainly about minority group problems”34 was freighted with an atmosphere of awkwardness (“Workshop Report” 247). Ultimately, Panel Nine committee members wrested two primary issues from the conversational chaos upon which to concentrate: “the education of ‘disadvantaged’ students, especially Negro students, and the approach that should be taken toward their training in language use” (“Workshop Report” 247). Harkening back to their prescriptivist roots, the Report notes that several panelists argued the merits of teaching “taste” to disadvantaged minority students (“Workshop Report” 247). However, the Panel records that their belletristic sentiments did not prevail. The Report states, “it was clear enough that the popular position was the current one of supporting the addition of a standard dialect to the non-standard (still sometimes sub-standard) speech of the disadvantaged student” (“Workshop Report” 247). Defenders of the aforementioned “popular position” were quick to admit “it was very hard, perhaps impossible to change a student’s dialect, but they argued that students had to be made ‘employable,’” and standard35 English “made the right impressions” in a job interview (247). The dialogue contained within the 1968 “Workshop Report” reveals the

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34 The emphasis is mine.

35 Capitalization original to “Workshop Report.”
acceptance of increasing student diversity and the struggles facing the profession as it grappled with the hierarchy of “standard” English, two elements that are foundational on both sides of the SRTOL argument.

The “Workshop Report” details that one committee participant conducted a study “of the reactions of white employers to certain [unnamed, but by inference, likely Black] linguistic terms . . . and felt that a few changes in a student’s speech would make a significant difference in the employers’ reactions” (247). Yet another unnamed committee member spoke to the problem of unemployment and African Americans. The “Workshop Report” notes “where unemployment is likely to be a major problem (i.e., for minority groups), the first concern of the schools should be to make students able to land a job. All of this represents a major change from the old-line insistence on ‘standards’ and training everyone to use ‘good English’” (247). Here, the Panel Nine committee members affirm that English composition instruction is moving beyond strict reliance upon prescriptivist “standards” toward a gradual acceptance of elements of linguistic diversity.

It is interesting to note the rhetoric the English professionals used in their dialogue on language issues; the Panel Nine committee is quick to cast their minority students in a negative light. The opening sentence of the “Workshop Report” frames the context for the meeting: “The discussion followed questions (mainly about minority group problems)” (247). As the report continues, there is a clear conflation of “disadvantaged” students and “Negro” students (247). Using language that was appallingly acceptable by 1968 standards, the CCCC “Workshop Report” takes a condescending tone by repeatedly referring to minority students under the all-
encompassing term “ghetto Negroes,” and referring to the challenges of diversity as problematic (247). One glaring example is found in the concluding paragraph of the Panel Nine report. Noting that the Panel was unable to attain consensus, the Report states, “We discussed whether it would be best to teach a ghetto Negro ‘standard English’ or to teach his future employer something about the nature of linguistic prejudice” (247). The term “ghetto Negro” is used with disturbing frequency in the *College Composition and Communication* journal until the term gradually disappears in favor of the more complementary descriptor “minority students” in the early nineteen-seventies.

While there is little doubt that many African American students were at a decided disadvantage economically and educationally as a result of decades of segregation and Jim Crow legislation, not all Black students could be accurately described under the umbrella of “ghetto Negro.” Juanita Williamson, a non-traditional adult student nearing completion of her doctorate in linguistics at The University of Michigan in the late mid-century, is one such an example of a Black student who would have likely winced at the description for many reasons. However, from an academic perspective, Williamson decried the conflation of race with aspects of identity, including a person’s dialect (or an inessential adjective used to describe a neighborhood). Her linguistic research pointed to the theory that Black speech and white speech have similarities that are informed more from geographical considerations than racial factors. In a 1974 *South Atlantic Bulletin* essay, “Black English and Black Attitudes,” linguist David Shores writes: “As you know, there has been in the last ten to fifteen years, considerable discussion among linguists and educators and others about whether it is possible to characterize certain ‘distinctive’
nonstandard features of American English as Black English” (105). Shores associates *Linguistic Atlas* project participants Hans Kurath, Raven McDavid, Jr. and Frederic G. Cassidy as representatives of Williamson’s polemic stance. Shores states:

These scholars . . . prefer to speak of statistical differences rather than inherent, structural differences. Their views can be summarized in Juanita Williamson’s work, the result of twenty years of observation in the South, which concludes that . . . the speech of the Negro does not differ materially from that of whites of the same economic and educational level of the area in which he has lived a greater part of his life. (Shores 105)

Notably, within his essay, Shores cites one of Williamson’s most frequently used quotations in her argument against Black English. Williamson contends: “The so-called distinctive features of Black English are neither Black or White, just American” (105). Williamson recognized the potential of labeling the “non-standard” speech dialects of African Americans as a way in which to further marginalize members of her community through hegemony; she believed anything other than so-called “standard” English would always be secondary.

Furthermore, Williamson insisted that there was no such thing as Black English because in spite of Williamson’s argument that no true “standard” (“What Can We Do About It” 25) of English actually exists, she argued that Black students have a right to “standard” English, the language that is theirs by birthright.\(^\text{36}\) Williamson saw facility with Language of Wider Communication (LWC) as a means by which underrepresented minorities could earn equal footing through discourse, and she strongly held that an

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emphasis on Black English was a disservice to students already disadvantaged through years of enforced segregation and educational marginalization. “Standard” English and LWC are hereinafter referred to interchangeably.

Because of her reputation as a nationally respected linguistics scholar, by 1968, Williamson was called upon to serve upon numerous Conference of College Composition and Communication committees, many of which were charged with developing guidelines for college composition instructors regarding AAL and “standard” English. Williamson’s influence and involvement is recorded via her participation in the CCCC. For example, Workshop Report No. 17, “Varying Dialects in Oral and Written Discourse,” in October, 1969; the CCCC Ad Hoc Committee on Social Dialects in 1970; and the CCCC’s Secretary’s Report No. 61 which centered upon NUC Resolution No.1, advocating the acceptability of all “non-Standard dialects in schools” beginning at kindergarten (301) reflect Williamson’s strong leadership within the CCCC. As detailed below, central to each of meeting is the intersection of language and society relative to “standard” English and dialectal diversity in the college classroom—the issue about which Williamson dedicated her scholarship, her passion, and her considerable energy. As chair for Committee 17, “Varying Dialects in Oral and Written Discourse,” Williamson led participants as they wrestled with the conundrum of how best to help minority students prosper in the integrated composition classroom:

[The session] centered on the questions of a definition of standard English and whether any standard English should be taught in the schools. No clear definition of

37 Capitalization is original to “Secretary’s Report” Number 61.

38 Capitalization is original to “Secretary’s Report” Number 61.
standard English emerged; regional, social and stylistic characteristics all seemed involved. Some discussants and audience believed strongly that no attempt should be made to alter a student’s speech. Others believed equally strongly that the schools have an obligation to teach whatever tools are necessary for social mobility. (255)

The debate over the definition of “standard” English is a re-occurring presence in professional journals during the late nineteen-sixties through the mid-seventies. In November of 1969, Williamson, who shared committee responsibilities with Ross Winterowd, Wallace Douglas, Elisabeth McPherson, William Irmscher, Richard Larsen, and Richard E. Young, (among others) met in Washington, D.C. to discuss issues relative to language instruction in higher education. According to the “Secretary’s Reports,” “Considerable discussion ensued on item Number One of NUC [New University Conference] resolutions, a statement beginning ‘All NCTE and section meeting and Executive Committees shall work actively to make non-Standard dialects acceptable in all schools from kindergarten on’” (“Secretary’s Report” No. 61, 301). The “Secretary’s Report,” published in October 1970 and authored by CCCC member Audrey Roth, details that Williamson and unnamed “others” offered the following counter perspective: “If an individual and his worth are respected, what he says is also respected and it becomes possible to erase an over-evaluation of language as a measure of personal worth” (Roth 301). In this statement of polite rebuttal to the NUC Resolution Number One, Williamson asserts that the conflation of language and personal worth is perilous for the binary such assumptions presume (“good” people communicate one way; “bad” people, another way). As SRTOL proponent McPherson argues, “Insisting that one way of talking is always
‘right,’ another always ‘wrong,’ carries its own message: students from backgrounds where school language is not spoken are inferior, probably dumb, and so are their parents and friends. Students who see themselves as dumb, or whose teachers think they are don’t learn much” (“Bait/Rebait” 8). Just as the argument that dialect is neither an indicator of intelligence or learning potential was beneficial in the advocacy of descriptive methodologies in writing instruction, this same argument also became foundational in influencing CCCC members to ratify the SRTOL Resolution. Removing the stigma of dialects long regarded as non-prestige was integral to dispelling the dialect as deficit theory embraced by prescriptivists. Similar to SRTOL’s proponents, Williamson insisted that adherence to the dominant discourse should be a choice, not a mandate. In the same breath, however, Williamson was quick to assert the primacy of teaching marginalized students LWC because she recognized that facility with the dominant discourse provided avenues for access to power, and access to power can lead to change.

Williamson’s arguments regarding NUC Resolution Number One affirm her position that strongly associating “non-standard” dialects with AAL is dangerous for the potential that association has for hegemonic manipulation. Williamson feared that “in teaching that certain features of English are ‘Black,’ and by inference not used by whites, Blacks will be taught one way and whites another, and we will in truth begin to have a Black language and a white language” in service of continued segregation (72). Williamson adds to her argument against bifurcating the English language along Black or white racial lines. She further explains her reasoning by asserting that in the late nineteen-sixties, “Few white people wish to be users of features labeled Black” (“Our Readers Write” 72). Williamson’s blunt statement regarding the implications of
racializing dialects speaks to the very binary she sought to avoid, arguing instead that all Americans have a right to be taught the conventions of “standard” English. During the meeting, committee participants noted the importance of two primary considerations needed for further study as CCCC prepared to advise college English educators regarding the place of “non-standard” dialects in composition instruction, or as recording secretary Roth notes, “attitudes of teachers and the complexities of socio-linguistics” (301). It was then determined that CCCC Chairman Wallace Douglas, in response to the NUC Resolutions, should marshal a committee to “formulate a statement for the use of CCCC and the Executive Committee concerning the relationship between language and social attitudes, especially in the case of teachers, and to suggest a direction toward which CCCC can develop” (Roth 301). Douglas then appointed Richard E. Young and linguists John Ashmead and Juanita Williamson as members of the Ad Hoc Committee on Social Dialects. They were charged with drafting a statement regarding language and social attitudes to “guide the future of the CCCC” in the matter (Roth 301). The 1970 meeting of the CCCC Ad Hoc Committee became one of the first steps toward the drafting of the SRTOL Resolution of which Geneva Smitherman later became involved. However, archival research conducted by Stephen Parks indicates that Williamson and the Ad Hoc committee “would apparently never publish a report” (130) though, according to Parks, it is probable that the Resolution’s initial name, “a student’s right to his own language,” was a likely product of the Ad Hoc committee (135).

Many of the arguments used in support of the move away from the confines of prescriptivism became arguments in support of the SRTOL Resolution itself. For example, the sociolinguists’ perspective that the English language itself is fluid, ever-
changing, and evolving within the culture using it makes strict adherence to an arbitrary
“standard” an intractable position—especially when considering the role of audience in
written or oral communication. A rhetorical consideration for the role of audience makes
“standard” English inappropriate in every single situation because effective
communication is context specific. In valorizing descriptivism, Donald J. Lloyd asserts
that linguistics “gives us a measure by which we can test every move we make in the
classroom, by asking ourselves whether it is in keeping with the nature and structure of
our language and in keeping with the nature of language habits” (“Composition Built
around Linguistics” 42). Lloyd goes on to praise linguistics in the teaching of
composition because “linguistics gives us a vision of the language, which taken into the
classroom, makes it a happy, fruitful, and meaningful subject for teacher and student” in
part, for the recognition of the social dimension of language (43). Lloyd’s vision of
language enhanced through a linguistics perspective stands in direct opposition to
traditional prescriptive composition pedagogy, which he describes as “the carping and
nagging traditionally associated with us [college composition educators]” (42). Lloyd’s
argument in a nutshell is this: hyper-focus on error (and error avoidance) often yields less
compelling prose because the writer is less willing to take risks that may be perceived as
“wrong.” By contrast to the “carping and nagging,” SRTOL makes room for writers to
employ rhetorical flexibility to make the expression of ideas less rudimentary than
powerful.

**SRTOL: A Portrait of its Protagonists**

Central to the successful arguments in advocacy of SRTOL were three essential
elements: the appropriation of linguistic science as a basis for adapting and revising
approaches to composition pedagogy; a tacit acknowledgement of perpetual student
diversity; and the recognition of the problem posed by the artificial hierarchy of so-called
“standard” English as the prestige dialect. As Chapter Two details, in the late mid-
century, linguistic research challenged prescriptivists’ notion of the nature of “correct”
language. The shift from long-held ideas of “correctness” based upon concepts of how
language ought to be used to a study of the way a culture actually uses language were
important progressions toward the adoption of SRTOL. Although there are many scholars
who were supporters of SRTOL, this chapter features several whose arguments are
representative of the positions widely held by Resolution advocates. More importantly to
this project, the scholars described in this chapter carried prominent roles that figured
enormously in the linguistic turn in composition history. While many scholars rose in
support of the controversial SRTOL Resolutions, the positions of SRTOL advocates
Geneva Smitherman, Henry Thoma, and James Sledd are among those featured in this
section because their published works on the issue are pertinent representations of the
perspectives of their colleagues who were also proponents of SRTOL.

Writing in 1957, Henry Thoma comments on the influence of linguistics in
composition instruction. He observes three germinal influences in composition pedagogy
during the period of 1931-1956: general semantics, modern linguistics study, and
communication studies, the latter of which emerged as a result of the rapid emergence of
global communication following the end of World War II (Thoma 36-37). Regarding the
effect of linguistics in composition coursework, Thoma predicts the need for a
declaration outlining the profession’s position on the place of prescriptive grammar.
Thoma states “it may take a generation of scholars, teachers, and writers working
together before a statement of teaching grammar can be worked out which will satisfy all concerned” (37). It would be fifteen years before the first draft of the SRTOL Resolution was written in the wake of one of the most dramatic cultural upheavals ever experienced in America, authored in part by Smitherman.

Among the chief critics of prescriptive composition pedagogy is Smitherman, who is perhaps the most vocal proponent of SRTOL. Smitherman describes the correctionist approach to composition as “a misguided notion . . . [that is a] painstaking and almost always useless and insignificant process [in which] little else is stressed” (“English Teacher” 59). Endless recitations on rules of grammar at the expense of meaning-making, she argues, compromise the act of communication. Smitherman notes the particular offense of prescriptivism’s omission of the rhetorical consideration of audience. She states, “If we recognize rhetoric as the art of persuasion and the aim of composition, both oral and written, as communication of that art, we can readily see that we’re talking about elements which have nothing to do with the English teacher’s ‘mania for correctness’” (“English Teacher” 64). The larger goal of audience awareness, Smitherman insists, is of primacy in communication, because “Audiences are moved by message and style of delivery, not correct spelling . . .” (“English Teacher” 64). But Smitherman bristles most at the hierarchical considerations of privileging “standard” English over other dialects. Fellow linguist and advocate of SRTOL James Sledd agrees. Using the definition of standard English proffered by nineteen forties-era linguist C. C. Fries as “that set of language habits in which the most important of affairs of our country are carried on, the dialect of the socially acceptable in most of our communities,” James Sledd argues that Fries acknowledges the “standard” as “the ‘bosses’” language from the
beginning” (Sledd, “In Defense” 669). Smitherman attests to the racial component imbuined in the advocacy of “standard” English over a student’s language of nurture when she states that prescriptive pedagogy assuming the goal is “readying the Black student for the world: (read: white America)” is a faulty premise (Smitherman, “English Teacher” 59). Sledd notes an unnamed colleague’s anecdote about the importance of “standard” English using the metaphor of food. The colleague illustrates the limitations that Black students may face negotiating the world of the middle class apart from mastery of the dominant dialect. Sledd relates the unnamed English instructor’s logic regarding the role of “standard” English in a student’s post-college experience. The colleague states “I’ve made it to steak, I’m headed for lobster, and I want to take my students with me” (“In Defense” 672). Presumably, Sledd’s colleague sees “standard” English as the proverbial meal ticket to the middle class.

If only it were that easy.

With typical candor, Sledd outlines a less sanguine view of reality in his reaction to his colleague’s goal of equipping his students for the “good” life, thanks to “standard” English. Sledd reflects on the issue in 1983:

English teachers (of all people) should know that downward mobility is a more likely fate for the majority of Americans than moving up. That isn’t necessarily a cause for grief. One dreams of a world where everyone might hope for food, clothing, shelter, medical care, work that isn’t soul destroying, some leisure; but the material paraphernalia of many middle-class lives could be much reduced without real loss. There is no students’ right to their own lobster. (“In Defense” 673)
Beyond the theory advanced by SRTOL opponents that mastery of LWC is a necessary condition for employment and a gateway to the middle class, is the problem of the treatment of the student’s dialect within the confines of the study of “standard” English. Regarding prescriptive approaches to “standard” English, Smitherman notes, “The rationale is that this world is one in which Black kids must master the prestige dialect if they are to partake of that socio-economic mobility for which America is world-renowned” (“English Teacher” 59). Smitherman contends that dialectal eradication, the stance that considers Black English something that should be consigned to oblivion, is unacceptable. As a linguist, Smitherman contends that Black English, with its own internal grammar and syntax structure, is a dialect deserving of the same respect as “standard” English. Smitherman argues, “Language power is a function not of one’s dialect but of larger linguistic structures skillfully and effectively employed” (“English Teacher” 60). Black English, skillfully employed, Smitherman maintains, wields rhetorical prowess beyond the boundaries imposed by the LWC. Similarly, Smitherman and Sledd see bi-dialectalism, or code-switching (the contemporary referent) between Black English and LWC, as equally egregious for its patent denial of the primacy of the student’s home dialect. Linguist Wayne O’Neil provides a definition of bidialectalism that is more to the point when it comes to the role of language and identity:

bidialectalism refers to a movement in education to systematically render lower-class students able to speak [and write] both their native dialect and standard [39] English.

Bidialectalism differs in that it is meant mostly for lower-class blacks and not for the

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[39] Punctuation is original to O’Neil.
lower class in general. It comes at a time when many blacks\(^{40}\) are piecing together their identity, saving it from powerful attempts to fragment and destroy it. (O’Neil 11)

O’Neil summarizes the connection between the reclamation of Black identity during the late civil rights movement and its relationship to issues regarding Black dialect. Sledd views bi-dialectalism as a futile proposition based on the simplicity that in teaching bi-dialectalism, “the most essential of all conditions might not be met—namely, the desire of the children to talk like the white middle class” (“Bi-dialectalism” 1313). The implication that one dialect is inferior to another is inherently problematic, particularly for Black students newly introduced to desegregated schools and colleges for the first time in American history.

Einar Haugen, a pioneer in the field of sociolinguistics, theorized that “standard” English embodies hegemonic overtones. Regarding standardized national and international languages, Haugen insists in his 1972 book *The Ecology of Language* that standardized languages have “nearly always been clique languages, either grown up in or regulated by the ruling network of a country . . . [and are the result of] a concentration of political power, which establishes dominion over an area in which it is convenient for that power to have a single language for communicating with its subjects” (258). As described in Chapter Two, part of the early resistance to linguistic relativism of the progressive structuralists was rooted in the fear of a breach in the maintenance of the status-quo and the softening of the boundaries between social classes. However, many

\(^{40}\) Punctuation is original to O’Neil.
proponents of SRTOL, including linguists Sledd, Smitherman, and Haugen, decried the conflation of power with linguistic markers of race and class, and recommended a turn away from linguistic prescriptivism for its role as a shibboleth in identifying and then enforcing class borders.

For example, Sledd, in his controversial essay, “In Defense of the Student’s Right,” borrows language historian Peter Trudgill’s assertion that “there is nonetheless no question that standard American English . . . is by its origin and nature a class dialect, essentially an instrument of domination” (669). Although Sledd favors teaching LWC, even commenting “so far as I know, . . . there is nobody who would not teach standard English, spoken or written, to students who want to learn it” (670), the choice to develop mastery of LWC is one of the foundational elements of SRTOL. It also is the crux of the debate on the merits of the Resolution. As Chapter Four describes, the socio-cultural events of the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies—the movement toward Black nationalism informed by the separate but concurrent civil rights and Black Power movements—were factors in student resistance to “indoctrination” into white culture via “standard” English, the language of white supremacy. It was not uncommon for Black students, finally able to fully embrace racial dignity as a result of the civil rights and Black Power movements, to reject efforts to “whiten” their speech. Linguists Walt Wolfram and Ralph Fasold observe in 1969, “If a realization develops that this [Black] dialect, an important part of black culture, is as distinctively Afro-American as anything in the culture, the result may well be a new respect for Black English within the community” (143). Because Sledd and Smitherman held that students should have a

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* Capitalization original to Wolfram and Foshold.
voice in the choice of dialect of personal privilege, the mandate for strictures on what was taught and how it was taught in English composition classrooms became the foci of apologists of SRTOL. As early as 1968, CCCC “Workshop Report 9A and 9B” subtitled “Dialect Studies and Social Values,” points to the influence of Black pride in the college English classroom. The “Workshop Report” notes “one participant pointed out that there was a growing feeling of ‘black is beautiful’ and that any attempt to ‘whiten’ the dialect of a ghetto Negro was not in the end going to solve any problems” (“Workshop Report” 247). Although the problem of an academic achievement gap existed between minority students and their white counterparts due largely to generations of educational and social oppression, Smitherman insists that the implementation of creative pedagogical strategies in college composition classes far surpass rote drill and skill grammar exercises.

Smitherman, in 1972, insists, “the gravity of the literacy problem is such that I feel virtually ANY activity geared in this direction is preferable to frittering away valuable classroom time on ‘correct’ usage drills or rewriting the ‘mistakes’ on a composition” (“English Teacher” 62). Noting that Black culture is primarily an oral culture, Smitherman sees SRTOL as a useful means through which the Black student can express the African tradition of orality instead of expression through written communication. She anticipates that the future (beyond her 1972 essay) may likely privilege speaking skills above writing skills, thereby favoring African American students. She even suggests that

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42 Capitalization original to “Workshop Report.”

43 Adjective and noun as indicated are original to “Workshop Report.”

44 Smitherman sometimes uses all capitals for added emphasis.
“oral work should be substituted for much of the written work in the English classroom” via alternative means such as panel discussions, debates, dramatic productions, or even an incorporation of rapping (“English Teacher” 62). “It’s not models of correctness [needed by students]—they have their own anyway,” Smitherman argues regarding the effectiveness of prescriptive methodology in teaching minority writers (“English Teacher” 62). What is needed, she asserts, is “a broader understanding of the intricate connection between one’s language and his cultural experience, combined with insight into the political nature and social stratification of American dialects. They need to see how language is not something decreed from on High but an evolutionary dynamic, fluctuating according to the dictates of its users” (“English Teacher” 62). Smitherman’s aforementioned statement encapsulates the triad of arguments that champions of SRTOL advocated: the influence of linguistic science in adapting composition pedagogy to the moment; the acknowledgement of the perdurable nature of student diversity; and the recognition of the problematic hierarchy imposed by “standard” English. Her statement also indicates the need to politicize the classroom by encouraging frank discussions on the relationship of dominant social forces and ideologies surrounding language usage.

Smitherman’s fervent advocacy of SRTOL is informed by the Resolution’s potential in mitigating the educational injustices that were a legacy of the legal apartheid imposed by Jim Crow. As one of the original authors of SRTOL, Smitherman commends the opportunity SRTOL initially represents as a means through which to initiate a dialectic regarding power and ideology—two structures that are inherent in controversial issues governing language and its uses. She notes, “It is axiomatic that if Black people were in power in this country, Black English would be the prestige idiom” (“English
Teacher” 63). Smitherman contends that those in power stipulate the parameters surrounding language, a point that she maintains cannot be emphasized enough. In the wake of the ruling class’ dictates regarding LWC, Smitherman notes that Black students themselves sometimes hold a dim view of their own dialect. “They [Black students] too have been brainwashed about the ‘inherent and Absolute\(^{45}\) 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” (“English Teacher” 64). In the 1969 study of Black junior high students that informed her dissertation, Smitherman discovered that while the Black students conceded that according to school standards, their speech was considered “wrong,” “none said that they would change their dialect nor that of their parents and peers” (“English Teacher” 63). The students had no desire to exchange their dialect for another, no matter the perceived advantages. Linguist Thomas Kochman offers a similar perspective on African American resistance to “standard” English. He writes, “It is to the credit of the linguistic approach that it has at least recognized that the speaker’s native dialect has cultural values for him and is not to be tampered with . . . Unfortunately, the linguistic approach accepts as social determinant the same obnoxious and racist standards as the prescriptivist-assimilationist approach” (88). Kochman here recognizes the influence of Black nationalism and its efforts to inculcate racial pride among minority members. Sledd and Kochman argue that in light of ethnic pride, bidialectalism is a futile proposition because its assimilationist approach is targeted to a culture that may be resistant to the acquisition of a second dialect commonly associated with the status quo. Sledd argues, “We are past the stage when teachers, whether Africans or Caucasians, can

\(^{45}\) Capitalization original to Smitherman.
think well of themselves for trying to turn black people into uneasy imitations of the whites” (“Bi-dialectalism” 1314). Sledd insists that rather than focusing on bidialectalism, efforts would be better spent on improving social conditions. Sledd, as Smitherman and Kochman, advocates an emphasis on critical thinking in an effort to raise student awareness of the ideologies surrounding language and culture. Similarly, Kochman insists that the possibilities of changing ideologies of language issues through social change. Kochman asks, “Does it really matter how people of status speak? You say, what if the social order is not changed? Then I ask you, what have you accomplished in your program: the ability to avoid some stigmatized forms which are so stigmatized because the people who speak them are?” (157). Sledd suggests English teachers take up the mantle of political reformer, declaring “instead of teaching standard English as a second dialect they teach getting out of Vietnam, getting out of the missile race, and stopping the deadly pollution of the one world we have” (“Bi-dialectalism” 1315). A by-product of the mediation of American social ills might be the improvement in race relations, according to Sledd.

Arguments regarding the merits of bidialectism aside, the central tenet of the SRTOL Resolution embraced by its protagonists is the recognition of linguistic flexibility and freedom from the constraints of prescriptivism embodied by the statement. As Sledd writes in his response to Thomas Farrell’s attack on Sledd’s defense of SRTOL: “It seems to me that the loud concern of the privileged to impose their language on the oppressed may make language the gravestone, not the cornerstone, of an education for freedom” (“James Sledd Responds” 828).
Sledd’s eloquent commentary is a succinct distillation of why SRTOL matters. Just as Williamson argued that “if he wishes”\textsuperscript{46} a student will make changes from her home dialect to LWC, Sledd, Smitherman, and Kochman affirm the importance of the freedom to make linguistic choices that fit a given rhetorical situation—apart from the impediment imposed by prescriptive rules.

**SRTOL: The Resolution and its Antagonists**

The appropriation of linguistic science as a basis for adapting and revising approaches to composition pedagogy, a tacit acknowledgement of perpetual student diversity, and the recognition of the problem posed by the artificial hierarchy imposed by so-called “standard” English as the prestige dialect were central to arguments used by those arguing for SRTOL’s adoption. However, they were also central to the arguments used by those who argued against its adoption. An example is Juanita Williamson’s dogged persistence of the ineffectiveness of prescriptivist-tinged pedagogy, particularly among marginalized students. Williamson might never have foreseen that the arguments she and her like-minded colleagues offered against SRTOL were in many ways beneficial in advancing SRTOL’s proponents, who also heralded the move away from prescriptivism—but for entirely different reasons. While heartily endorsing the move away from the constraints of prescriptivism in college composition instruction, Williamson waged a career-spanning campaign against the popular tendency to ascribe dialectal differences based strictly upon race. Throughout Williamson’s forty-plus years as a college educator, she worked tirelessly at a small Memphis HBCU to help four

decades of Black students develop facility with LWC in an effort to help them gain avenues of access to power and opportunity through good communication skills based upon a firm grasp of “standard” English. As Chapter Three details, although Williamson argued that linguistic discrepancies were based upon geographical and regional speech patterns rather than racial characteristics, her advocacy for linguistic pluralism may have inadvertently contributed to the adoption of the SRTOL Resolution—in spite of her vehement opposition to it. As effective as Williamson’s defense of a descriptive approach to writing instruction was, she, along with other scholars did not advocate the SRTOL Resolution because of her strong conviction that the Resolution was a step in the wrong direction, particularly for Black students. Williamson understood that although unfair, “standard” English’s position as the international language of currency was unlikely to change. Any dialect other than “standard” English would always be secondary, she reasoned, and therefore rendered non-prestige dialect by comparison, thereby inviting prejudice. In recognizing the inherent disparity between “standard” English and other dialects, Williamson used her acknowledgement of the implicit hierarchy of LWC in a manner different from that of SRTOL’s advocates: she urged her students to use the hierarchy to their advantage to “beat the system.” Increasingly, however, the SRTOL Resolution was seen by English professionals as an “either/or” proposition relative to a students’ use of her home language in college composition instruction. As SRTOL proponent Elisabeth McPherson argues in a 1980 retrospective on the Resolution: “Some opponents believed giving students a right to the dialects of their nurture deliberately denied them the right to practice other patterns and varieties of English, as though a right to one thing precluded a right to another (“Bait/Rebait” 8). Roy Wilkins, who replaced
W.E. B. DuBois as editor of the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, was another prominent writer who agreed with Williamson’s stance on SRTOL and Black English. In his 1971 editorial entitled “Black Nonsense,” Wilkins insisted “What our children need, and other disadvantaged American children as well . . . is training in basic English which today is as near an international language as any in the world. To attempt to lock them in a provincial patois is to limit their opportunities in the world at large” (78). Wilkins then expounded on the global possibilities of “standard” English as a means through which communication with English speakers of all races across the world was a far better proposition for study than Black English, which he labeled “black nonsense” (78).

Other compositionists such as John Hendrickson mocked SRTOL and its intent to engender respect for the language of diverse students with his sardonic 1972 rebuttal of the Resolution:

> Praiz be for I hav liv to see grandpas personal-type tibetan-Amurican inglish vindicated. at last igdorence has took its riteful plas in the world if olny grandpa hadnt of bin in such a hury to check out he cood og got a job tiching inglish most anywheres from the plow tot the compozzi9zhun clas in yoost won yump . . . This is muy dilect and I’god its gonna be perservd even if itmeens the deth of the bestest anglo-imperialist fashistrtring that was ever rote. (301)

Hendrickson, rather than consider the rule driven, systematic structures of non-prestige dialects, instead impugns difference, electing to conflate spelling errors with non-prestige dialects (“Praiz” for Praise, “hav” for have, “fashistrting” for fascist writing, etc.). Alternatively, Hendrickson awkwardly underscores his brazen close-minded appraisal of

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47 Capitalization original to Wilkins.
the linguistic plurality toward which America was rapidly moving. In his permutation of legitimate dialects, Hendrickson distinguishes himself from Williamson and other detractors of SRTOL by his neglect of the rhetorical possibilities of dialects other than “standard” English. However, Hendrickson’s published mockery of non-standard dialects serves only to accentuate the divisive nature of the SRTOL issue. While Hendrickson used sarcasm to ridicule non-standard dialects, other SRTOL opponents used the advantages of linguistic unity through “standard” English to advance their cause.

Linguistic cohesion through the common standards of LWC was a popular argument offered by SRTOL opponents, particularly during the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, a time of increasing polarity among Americans. William H. Pixton argues against SRTOL, fearing the replacement of “standard” English. He writes: “On the one hand, the incompatibility of the alleged goals of composition courses—to promote dialects and thus diversity—and standard English, which provides common dialectal ground and thus the centrality needed for precise communication, indicates that the dialects of various nurtures should displace standard English in the classroom” (247). Scholars such as Pixton, as McPherson later observes, saw SRTOL as a license for the radical substitution of “standard” English, as opposed to a means to expand the rhetorical boundaries of the English language in college composition instruction. In her defense of the Resolution, McPherson argues: “The language statement urges an enlargement of choices, not restriction to a single choice . . . Instead, the statement encourages honest consideration of what language choices are appropriate, where, when, and to whom” (“Bait/Rebait” 8). Although Williamson and Pixton, both opponents of SRTOL, agree that dialectal dexterity is rhetorically advantageous, they may not have foreseen that
elements of the same argument are found in arguments advocating the SRTOL Resolution. Pixton affirms that dialectal variations occur naturally in the course of everyday communication and gives the following example: “A knowledge of standard English does not require impeccable speech. When talking to his family, a man uses the speech of intimacy, his personal manifestation of dialect that is understood regardless of its eccentricities. When that same man talks among friends, these eccentricities are displaced by the dialect shared by the larger group” (247). However, McPherson, in her retrospective written six years after Pixton’s “Counterstatement” essay, condemns what she perceives to be Pixton’s misinterpretation of a key definition. McPherson states, “Other opponents [of SRTOL], perhaps unaware that the term ‘dialect’ refers to a set of minor variations in pronunciation, syntax, and usage, assumed that supporters were advocating the use of street language, slang, and vulgarity” (8). McPherson explains that SRTOL is, in part, a reminder that situational dialectal shifting is common among all language users because “grammar was built into us as we learned to talk, enlarged as our language experience increased, and altered only when we saw some benefit” (12).

McPherson’s statement also refers to the rhetorical importance of one’s audience in the communicative act. Harkening back to the admonition of the ancient Greek rhetoricians, a good writer or speaker would do well to take an accounting of her audience before crafting a message to achieve the desired result. Richard W. Hall writes in defense of SRTOL and the importance of audience. Hall notes in the *English Journal* in 1972, that audience awareness is important “because it signals the speaker’s presence in his chosen colony. It cuts across the general uprootedness of American life to give a sense of belonging. It acts as a formula that swings open the door to turf and territory” (706). But
audience is yet another dimension of the division between proponents and opponents of SRTOL. While advocates of the Resolution argue for the rhetorical dexterity afforded in lifting the parameters imposed by prescriptivism, some SRTOL detractors argue the opposite. Using the second sentence of the Resolution which states: “Any claim that only one dialect is acceptable should be viewed as an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another, not as either true or sound advice to speakers or writers, nor as moral advice to humans,” SRTOL opponents assert the importance of audience through the linguistic cohesion afforded by LWC. “Standard English is used by the majority of persons in the English-speaking world, not so they may dominate, but so they may communicate,” writes SRTOL antagonist Pixton in 1972 (299). Teaching LWC as the “standard” in American English classrooms, Resolution antagonists contend, is one means to actively promote the homogenous nature of our differing cultures through a common language.

Warning that “the world of everyday affairs . . . demands intelligible English from the individual, not the dialect of his nurture,” Pixton asserts that difficulty may follow students who are taught that their home dialect is “as good as standard English,” even as Pixton acknowledges the hierarchy of the prestige “standard” dialect by inferring that any dialect other than LWC is by contrast unintelligible (299). Pixton continues his diatribe against SRTOL, asserting the dangers of “the utter leveling of American society . . . which would destroy the distinction between knowledge and ignorance, fact and fiction, English and non-English” (299). Pixton’s critique speaks to the apprehension he and

48 The full text of SRTOL is contained within the special edition of Conference on College Composition and Communication. 25 (Fall 1974): 1-34. Print.
other detractors of SRTOL held toward the CCCC’s move away from language uniformity. Rather than being seen as unifying because “standard English provides common dialectal ground,” Pixton interprets SRTOL as a statement that would instead, seal its doom. Pixton’s declared purpose in his 1974 essay “A Contemporary Dilemma: The Question of Standard English” is to “encourage the CCCC membership to reject this resolution”49 on the grounds that students, “having a right to their own language, might be denied his right to higher education” by giving primacy to their language of nurture over the “immorally oppressive” language of American business (247). But as Hall points out, “the teacher who drills language and speech patterns while ignoring the values that lie behind them may find he is whispering into a hurricane” (707). Hall continues, noting that the socio-cultural landscape of America is far too diverse for a unified standard of language. He observes in 1972: “Language will reflect and reinforce these differences, where a centrifugal drive toward unity no longer exists” (707). Hall’s commentary reflects the recognition of the permanence of a perpetually diverse student body.

From the vantage point of 2010, Jeff Zorn echoes Pixton’s appraisal of the Resolution some thirty-eight years after Pixton’s diatribe was published. Drawing on his English composition praxis at an Alabama HBCU, Zorn takes issue with the assertions made by SRTOL by outlining six main points of disagreement. Zorn maintains:

SRTOL (1) never begins to examine a ‘right’ to one’s own language; (2) offers no consistent view on the importance of dialect; (3) wildly overrates its ‘sophisticated’ knowledge in sociology and linguistics; (4) both draws on and feeds into a reactionary

49 Capitalization of “resolution” is original to Pixton.
politics of ethnic-cultural chauvinism; (5) clumps people into homogeneous, internally undifferentiated groups, missing individuals (in particular, individual student writers) entirely; (6) tries to shame English teachers for professional work of which we should be proud. (150)

Zorn concludes: “Claims to a ‘right’ to one’s own language are trumped by the obligation to write well” . . . [because] Formal Standard English remains the academic norm, and a student has no ‘right’ not to employ it with excellence” (153). While Zorn’s strong denunciation of SRTOL comes thirty-six years after its approval by CCCC members, his assessment of SRTOL offers contemporary readers an opportunity to reassess what (if anything) SRTOL changed.

The 1974 CCCC background statement accompanying the Resolution was, according to Smitherman, influenced by “the ground-breaking linguistic research of scholars including Chomsky, Labov, Halliday, and Dillard” (“Students Right” 23). The background statement offers the most tangible evidence of what the freighted term “right” implies within the SRTOL Resolution’s name. Stating that “the most serious difficulty facing ‘non-standard’ English speakers in developing writing ability derives from [teachers’] exaggerated concern for the least serious aspects of writing,” the background statement announces a shift in viewing dialects of difference as a hindrance in writing to a means through which to enrich a student’s writing. The background statement allows student writers the “right” to convey attitudes and information “in the dialect the writer finds most congenial” and privileges content above overt attention to

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50 Capitalization is original to Zorn.

51 Emphasis is original to CCCC background statement.
“spelling, punctuation and usage” (“Students Right” 23). In stating that “we view varieties of dialects as an advantage,” the CCCC background statement expresses dialectal entitlement—a clear departure from the constraints and rigidity of prescriptive pedagogical practices writing teachers exercised for most of the twentieth century.

**Conclusion**

As Stephen Parks argues, the widely contested debates concerning SRTOL were born of a fervent desire by academics to “remake the university as part of an imagined egalitarian and democratic society” (viii). The yearning for an equal playing field for all students through greater equanimity in language pedagogy was greatly influenced by the swirling social upheaval of the late nineteen-sixties through the mid-seventies, which at times seemed simultaneously unrelenting and disconcerting as each riot or controversy took its turn on the nightly news. Through the historical fog of Vietnam anti-war protests, multiple political assassinations of beloved leaders, nation-wide campus uprisings culminating in the 1970 murder of four unarmed Kent State students, combined with the painfully slow but certain progress of civil rights advances, a common language seemed at times, the only thing Americans could share. SRTOL at its most basic level, was an earnest effort by academics to integrate diverse communities and dialects into the academy while simultaneously promulgating a change in attitude regarding linguistic pluralism in the larger culture through language. Yet even as language united us, American scholars remained strongly divided upon how best to teach composition amid the new and unfamiliar landscape of student diversity.

As noted in this chapter, college English teachers such as Williamson—who along with many other scholars advocated the instruction of LWC for reasons as disparate as an
unwavering commitment to prescriptivism to a desire to equip students with the language of the workplace—were frequently branded as conservative. This restrictive labeling marked them as among those resistant to progressive pedagogical theories involving change, such as the change epitomized in SRTOL. Even as late as 1999, Keith Gilyard characterizes Williamson’s nineteen seventies-era stance as conservative, which belies Williamson’s reformist agenda of racial empowerment through inventive methodologies of the symbiosis of linguistics and composition instruction. Compared to their more progressive counterparts, STROL opponents were seen as politically conservative. The strong association of “standard” English use with its alleged economic benefits (and by inference capitalism) advocated by Williamson, Pixton, and the CCCC Committee for Dialect Studies and Social Values, to name a few, helped to instantiate SRTOL opponents as complicitious in accusations of what Stephen Parks refers to as “capitalist oppression” (216). Those not already predisposed to matriculation into a capitalistic system due to race or class bias might find barriers to upward mobility (and access to lobster) difficult apart from mastery of the dominant dialect.

Although protagonists and antagonists of SRTOL remained deeply entrenched in their personal positions even from the Resolution’s nascent days, it is intriguing that proponents and opponents used similar pillars in their respective arguments for dramatically different means. Perhaps this similarity is resultant of the incompatible proposition offered by the SRTOL affirmation itself. As Parks points out, SRTOL created two contradictory recommendations: “One, teachers are responsible for ensuring that students learn standard English. Two, teachers should not teach standard English.”

52 Capitalization is original to Parks.
(216). This irreconcilable conundrum is what lay waste to the document’s potential; because, as Parks maintains, neither side was able to “produce a sense of how these two apparently contradictory positions could coexist and how the contradiction which emerged in the SROL debate could be left behind” (216). While many SRTOL proponents and antagonists agreed that pedagogical strategies that embraced an inflexible view of language were outdated in light of challenges of new diversity on college campuses, the Resolution’s advocates harbored a more flexible approach than did SRTOL’s detractors, many of whom, perhaps irrationally, feared the replacement of “standard” English and its prominent role in academic discourse.

Beyond STROL’s perceived impotence in composition instruction praxis, the Resolution claimed key successes; the undeniable influence of the linguistic turn in changing the perceptions and attitudes surrounding language, and the importance of questioning received wisdom imbued through linguistic mandates such as that taken up by advocates of prescriptivism. Although Patricia Bizzell declares in 1992 that the SRTOL Resolution “seems to be a dead letter” (“Academic Discourse” 129), Bizzell finds compromise in what she terms “hybrid discourse,” defined as “a mix of home and school languages (“Mixed Forms” 21). Judith Hebb, writing in 2002, describes the import of “hybrid discourse” to the future of composition studies. Hebb states:

While scholars are now publishing in alternative discourses, including ‘mixed’ or ‘hybrid’ forms, college students are only beginning to find acceptable spaces for their alternative writing styles in academia. This is especially true for inexperienced writers and those for whom English is a second language. If hybrid discourse were viewed along a continuum of linguistic and cultural possibility instead of according to its
proximity to the dichotomies of academic/norm and non-academic ‘other’ the term ‘hybrid discourse’ and the writing it describes could become both useful and valued in the academy. (21)

Hebb points to the legacy of SRTOL nearly fifty years since its ratification by the members of CCCC. Essentially, SRTOL became instrumental in creating space for students on the margins whose attempts at acquisition of “standard” English may have been considered “remedial” during a time in which dialect-as-deficit models of “correctness” prevailed.

SRTOL is also likely responsible in part for a public awakening regarding the ideologies surrounding language and the proximity of language to notions of power and privilege. STROL may have inadvertently contributed to the importance of questioning alternative forms of discourse through the incorporation of pedagogical practices including critical thinking. Harkening back to SRTOL proponents Sledd, Smitherman, and Kochman’s advocacy of the interrogation of the political machinations that inform language dicta, Bizell sees the importance of contextualizing the history regarding “privileged language and discourse” while emphasizing that “so called ‘Standard’ English and academic discourse should be taught” (“Academic Discourse” 131). Whereas SRTOL antagonists including Williamson, Pixton, Wilkins and others decried the efforts to “normalize” Black English via its acceptance alongside “standard” English in academe, they did so out of their concerns for the limitations their students might face apart from a concentrated study of LWC, and consequently, their ability to enter the middle class. As this chapter has demonstrated, among the chief concerns of SRTOL

54 Capitalization is original to Bizzell.
detractors was a concern for the future employment and political involvement of students whom they believed benefitted more from immersion in “standard” English. Champions of the SRTOL Resolution likewise saw the transformative potential of an education freed from the constraints of a language system firmly rooted in the language of privileged discourse and detached from student identity.

While the SRTOL Resolution calls for respect and an awareness of the ideological implications of privileging one dialect over another, it pointedly omits any reference as to how teachers might achieve efficacy in its implementation. The next chapter demonstrates ways in which modern scholars have redressed this lacuna in college composition classrooms of the twenty-first century; classrooms whose students, nearly fifty years after SRTOL’s ratification, are finally filled with students of color.
CHAPTER SIX

Re-invigorating Students’ Right to Their Own Language: Contemporary Pedagogical Implications of the SRTOL Resolution

“The problem is SRTOL’s inextricable link to our mythic past is that it seems to be reaffirmed more as an affirmation of that past than as a call to examine new methods of teaching that could bring its ideals to fruition.” Cathryn Molloy in “Rhetorical Dexterity: A New Model for Teaching Writing” (58).

In 1909, rhetorician Fred Newton Scott described the grueling drudgery of the composition teacher’s work and was subsequently asked why someone would undertake such a responsibility. Scott replied: “It is the knowledge that from his teaching, men and women have gained power—power to strike hard blows for truth, good government, and right living” (“Aphorisms” 4). In many ways, Scott’s response frames the context for this concluding chapter because it symbolizes the confluence of the roles of rhetoric, composition instruction, linguistic identity, and politics that merge within composition classrooms in a democratic yet pluralistic society. Scott’s statement crystallizes the undeniable relationship between power and language, and the significant role of language in the perpetual struggle for social justice; his statement also underscores the importance of guiding students toward a critical understanding of the world in which they inhabit.

James Berlin recognizes Scott for his contributions that foreshadow SRTOL. In Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges 1900-1985, Berlin argues that Scott’s rhetoric, unusually progressive for the early twentieth century, presages the SRTOL Resolution through Scott’s insistence that denying a student’s language is “to deny her experience, forcing her to talk and write about what she does not know” (48). Berlin decries the pernicious nature of linguistic hierarchies, insisting “language is experience; to deny the validity of a person’s dialect is to deny the reality of person’s
experience and, finally, the reality of the person herself” (48). Scott and Berlin (nearly a century later) clearly conflate dialect and identity, two key elements of the SRTOL Resolution.

Although more than a century has passed since Scott’s prescient pronouncement, modern-day scholars such as Brian Kim Lovejoy, Carmen Kynard, Suresh Canaranjah, and Peter Elbow—among many others—have in one way or another embraced the freedom offered through the linguistic turn in fostering appreciation for the language students bring with them to the college writing classroom. For example, Elbow advocates using linguistic freedom when composing a draft. Elbow argues: “If we want to end up with a piece of writing that is called ‘correct,’ we can speak onto the page in our most comfortable language or mother tongue and then make the relatively few adjustments that are needed” (217). Elbow, aware of issues of identity, advocates using the “mentality of our vernacular speech” in the composing process, then revising in order to silence the “bad English alarms” hidden deeply in our brains (217). Elbow’s ideas of blending a students’ home dialect with Language of Wider Communication (LWC) instruction is an example of the influence of SRTOL in encouraging linguistic pluralism in composition pedagogy.

Similar to Elbow, Lovejoy encourages multi-culturalism in the classroom by inviting students to bring in “non-mainstream” examples of literacy from sources as varied as rap music lyrics, or poems from Paul L. Dunbar to facilitate discussions relative to the benefits of vernacular language over Standard English. This use of the linguistic turn is but one means through which students are emboldened not only to interrogate the language practices of their own culture, but that of the dominant culture as well. In
context of the global relevance of “standard” English as “linguistic capital,” (Bourdieu 56), this chapter examines the pedagogical implications of SRTOL nearly fifty years since its controversial adoption in an effort to consider the ways in which the policy continues to affect and shape composition instruction. Specifically, this chapter examines three essential aspects of the SRTOL Resolution and its pedagogical legacy: the Resolution’s role in raising the profession’s consciousness regarding attitudes and language; SRTOL’s influence in promoting a democratic educational ideal through acceptance of linguistic diversity; and the influence of SRTOL in paving the way for a critical analysis of ideologies through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the interrogation of language practices and the power dynamics that inform them.

Writing in 1997, Joseph Harris iterates the link between linguistics and composition. “One of the things that gets lost . . . is the long connection of composition with linguistics” (467). Harris then asserts an observation that is central to this chapter: “it’s worth remembering that work on language in composition has so far found its most eloquent and lasting expression in the politically volatile (and many ways contradictory) texts of the 1974 CCCC Statement on The Students Right to Their Own Language” (467).

In its call for the acceptance and preservation of dialects of diversity and students’ rights to use the language of their nurture, the 1974 SRTOL Resolution secured new territory relative to college composition pedagogy. In its stance against the constraints of prescriptive methodologies’ reliance upon traditional models of so-called “correctness,” SRTOL opened avenues of instruction that allowed greater flexibility and creativity in teaching rhetorical effectiveness by using a student’s language of nurture. The
interrogative posed in the CCCC background statement asks: “American schools and colleges have, in the last decade, been forced to take a stand on a basic educational question: what should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds?” (CCCC, “Explanation” 2). In the nearly five decades since the adoption of the controversial Resolution, passed by the Conference of College Composition and Communication (CCCC) by a margin of four votes to one, the question evolves from probing how teachers should respond to the variety in their students’ dialects to how best to find effective iterations that honor the spirit of SRTOL and America’s increasing linguistic diversity. Although some scholars such as Cathryn Molloy question whether the Resolution has fulfilled its promise, it is clear that SRTOL is instrumental in ushering in a paradigm shift regarding approaches to teaching college composition.

Molloy maintains that SRTOL’s continued popularity among compositionists correlates to the Resolution’s status as a “mythic” symbol that serves as a reminder of composition studies as a discipline in its nascent stages, “still working out its identity and fighting for legitimacy” (58). Although SRTOL does stand as a place marker in composition history for its recognition of the legitimacy of dialects other than so called “standard” English, Molloy argues that SRTOL remains more of a historical artifact than a “call to examine new methods of teaching that could bring its ideals to fruition” (58). With the American student demographic trending toward increasing diversity, however, now is a pertinent time to re-examine SRTOL and the role of language in the development of communicative strategies that foment resistance to racialized and other forms of oppression while fostering student success. Politics, language, and pedagogy are
likely always to be intertwined, for as Harris maintains, “Language is a badge of identity as well as a means of communication, and to think about its teaching in a racially divided and tense society is, sooner or later, to come up against the synesthetic question of color in speech, of the differences between white and Black English” (467).

**SRTOL and the “New America”**

In its attempt to right educational practices that historically subjugated students who were linguistically, culturally, racially, or even economically diverse from the mainstream, the 1974 adoption of SRTOL was rife with controversy. Marginalized students, distinguished by their perceived “failure” to adequately demonstrate proficiency with academic English, were in need of “reshaping,” as Geneva Smitherman describes, “to remake those on the margins in the image of the patriarch, to reshape the outsiders into talking, acting, thinking, and (to the extent possible) looking like insiders” (398). As the previous chapter demonstrates, college English teachers, who prior to the early nineteen-sixties were trained in “the appreciation and analysis of literature rather than an understanding of the nature of language” faced unprecedented challenges brought on by their linguistically diverse students—challenges for which the teachers were unprepared (Labov 1). Consequently, Labov notes, many composition instructors viewed the linguistic differences of their diverse students as “something to be overcome” rather than an asset that could prove rhetorically dexterous (1). It is within this context that SRTOL was drafted in 1972, then revised and adopted in 1974. Since that time, CCCC has adopted several additional statements regarding language use including the 1986 Position Statement on English as the Official Language; the 1988 Language Policy Resolution; the CCCC’s statement on Ebonics; followed by CCCC’s 2003 reaffirmation of the 1972
SRTOL Resolution, and the NCTE 2003 Resolution reaffirming the 1972 SRTOL Resolution (Scott et al. 9). In May of 2016, the CCCC issued its revised statement on Ebonics, effectively concretizing the organization’s stance on the affirmation of Black dialects, because, as the revised version emphatically declares, “Black languages, like Black lives, matter” (“CCCC 2016 Statement on Ebonics”). While the focus of this dissertation is the link between the linguistic turn and SRTOL, the position statements that follow the acceptance of the 1974 SRTOL Resolution indicate that the discipline of composition studies continues to wrestle with issues of language diversity even in the decades subsequent to its adoption.

The integration of public schools that began in earnest in the early nineteen-sixties introduced the reality of diversity to many students and teachers in formerly all-white college classrooms. While many composition scholars in the last third of the twentieth-century perceived departures from the status quo heteroclitic, the trend will likely reverse during the mid-point of the twenty-first century. According to H. Samy Alim, demographers predict that white Americans will become the minority in the United States population by the year 2050 (21). Furthermore, statistics indicate dramatic changes in English beyond the United States. Suresh Canagarajah notes the statistics of applied linguistics experts David Chrystal and David Graddol which point to data indicating that worldwide, “native speakers of English lost their majority in the 1970s” (588). Canagarajah asserts that multi-lingual users of English will outnumber native speakers of English globally by thirty-million. Because of increasing globalization, Canagarajah predicts that this “changing demography of English has profound implications for language norms (589). Given these statistics, a degree of urgency attends the work of
American English professionals as we consider the pertinence of SRTOL in an increasingly changing society in order to theorize ways through which language and diversity interact in a heterogeneous, democratic society. For as June Jordan maintains, language is a medium through which mutual understanding—an essential element in an increasingly diverse environment—might be possible. Jordan writes:

We can begin by looking at language. Because it brings us together, as folks, because it makes known the unknown strangers we otherwise remain to each other, language is a process of translation; a political process, taking place on the basis of who has the power to use, abuse, accept, and reject the words—the lingual messages we must attempt to transmit—to each other and/or against each other.” (38).

Jordon, a proponent of Black English, calls for “translation” in which discovery is central to the communicative act between individuals. Similar to Smitherman, Jordan views subsuming non-prestige dialects such as Black English to “standard” English is tantamount to silencing difference through linguistic homogenization. Jordan, as did the CCCC Executive Committee members who penned the 1974 Resolution asks: What are we going to do about it [the preservation of diverse language forms] (38)? In Smitherman’s 1977 book, Talkin and Testifyin, she queries, “How can I use what the kids already know to move them to what they need to know? (219)? Smitherman postulates that the answer is embedded in a respect for the language a student brings with her to the classroom, which in turn, allows the student not only to interact with classroom peers, but with instructors in a dynamic that allows for imaginative pedagogical strategies. Much of what follows examines the pedagogical implications of SRTOL as borne out through

55 Emphases are Smitherman’s.
innovative strategies that reflect the influence of the Resolution into the twenty-first century.

**Palimpsestic Permutations of SRTOL**

Some of the enduring pedagogical strategies implemented by instructors teaching at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) persist, in permuted forms, into the present and even inform pedagogies used in writing instruction aimed toward underserved student populations. For example, Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy argue that the HBCU’s unique position as “site[s] of counter-hegemonic communities” provide these private institutions with valuable perspectives on composition pedagogy for students whose subject positions differ from that of the status quo (24).

Mid-twentieth-century linguists and compositionists Beryl Bailey and Juanita Williamson borrowed techniques originating in foreign-language instruction to contrast a student’s home language with the “new” language of the college classroom. Contrastive analysis, as Chapter Three “The Composition Classroom as Cultural Mirror” relates, proved influential in bridging the acquisition of “standard” English with the student’s language of nurture. The pedagogical theories of “standard” English acquisition propounded by composition pioneers Bailey and later, Williamson were important steps in facilitating the development of basic writing skills among Black students who were economically and culturally positioned in opposition to the status quo—students who until the early nineteen-seventies could look primarily to HBCUs for higher education. As Kynard and Eddy observe, “We contend that the successes and challenges of HBCUs comes from a construction of students and faculty as having a shared fate with the racially subordinated people outside of the university, and an explicit and conscious
discourse of miseducation and racist exploitation, rather than the usual bourgeois liberal humanist variants of knowledge for knowledge’s sake” (25).

A contemporary variety of contrastive analysis includes code-switching, which Vershawn Young defines as “a strategy whereby black students are taught contrastive analysis—a method of comparing black English to standard English so they can learn to switch from one to the other in different settings” (52). More than a half-century prior to Young’s essay “Nah, We Straight: An Argument Against Code Switching,” Williamson offered a similar definition of code-switching, under the umbrella term of contrastive analysis in her 1957 Crisis essay, “What Can We Do About It:” “If we show him the structure of standard English and the structure of his own dialect, he will see what changes he should make and if he wishes, he will do so” (33). Williamson and Pierre Bourdieu share similar theories regarding the importance of audience awareness in effective communication. Bourdieu contends that language, because it is socially contrived, “must take as its object the relationship between the structured systems of sociologically pertinent linguistic differences and the equally structured systems of social difference” (54). Bourdieu’s statement acknowledges the implicit hierarchies embedded in language and the role those hierarchies play in communication. Similar to Smitherman, Bourdieu insists, “the competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be listened to, likely to be recognized as acceptable in all situations in which there is occasion to speak” (55). Though the scholarship of Williamson, Smitherman, and Bourdieu are

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56 Punctuation original to Young.

57 Emphasis is Bourdieu’s.
divergent, their interests converge at the point at which language, culture, and rhetoric intersect. Smitherman mirrors Bourdieu’s philosophy regarding the rhetorical consideration of audience in her text *Talkin and Testifyin* when she insists, “saying something correctly, and saying it well, are two entirely different Thangs” (229). Some compositionists argue that code-switching might be the most effective means by which to hybridize discourse, others offer differing perspectives.

While on the surface, code-switching appears to be an egalitarian solution in ameliorating vexing language issues, contemporary scholars ranging from Patrick Bruch, Robert Marback, and perhaps most demonstrably, Young view code-switching as a blatant nod to paternalism. Young writes: “code-switching is steeped in segregationist, racist logic that contradicts our best efforts and hopes for our students” (51). Situating code-switching in context with the tenets of SRTOL, Young asserts that code-switching embodies an assimilatory attitude which is anathema to the democratic goals of the Resolution states: “The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another” (CCC “Students Right”). Young argues that instead of empowering, code-switching in essence “replicates the same phony logic behind Jim Crow legislation—which held that the law recognized the equality of the races yet demanded their separation” (53). Young views code-switching, a modern aggregate of contrastive analysis, as nothing more than a remnant of a segregated past in which Black speech—like the Black race—is conferred a “badge of inferiority” (53). While contrastive analysis and code-switching remain as pedagogical tools particularly in basic writing instruction, it is important to recognize the role that student identity and ideology plays in these composition methodologies.
The concept of identity and ontology relative to writing instruction is seen in the writing of educational theorist Lev Vygotsky. Early in the twentieth century, Vygotsky asserts the importance of language to \textit{being} when he states, “[a] word is a microcosm of human consciousness” (153). Similarly, Gilyard argues that a word “is also a microcosm of human history” since “every utterance contains tracings of migration, mixing, negotiation, or conquest” (“The Rhetoric of Translingualism” 284). It is this connection to the past that makes language an inextricable element of our personhood. The derision of African American English, through code-switching, as Young argues, is tantamount to devaluing the culture represented by the dialect. SRTOL serves as a reminder that students deserve linguistic justice in the English classroom—particularly as our discipline continues to evolve. While extant scholarship on the subject of SRTOL differs widely on various aspects of the Resolution and its implementation, there is consensus on one primary issue: the necessity of respecting students’ dialects of difference as part of composition praxis. As Smitherman observes, when negative pronouncements regarding a student’s home dialect are made by an instructor, “you ain jus dissin dem, you talkin about they mommas!” (“Black Language” 28). Impugning a student’s dialect is an indictment upon their culture, “they mommas,” and their identity; it is also a means by which to deny their rights to their own language. Within this context, socio-educational and ethnographic researchers Kris Gutierrez, Betsy Rymes, and Joanne Larson demonstrate how power relations are played out through the student/teacher dynamic. In what follows, I correlate their scholarship on teacher/student communication in general to consider their arguments relative to composition instruction and the intersection of prestige and non-prestige dialects.
**Power Relations and the Composition Classroom**

Gutierrez et al. theorize that “what counts as learning and who has access to this learning is determined by the values of the local culture and the larger society” because, as the ethnographers observe, “the classroom mirrors the larger societal structures and power relationships” (445). Specifically, Gutierrez et al. identify three sites for cultural discourse termed “spaces” that introduce students into the hierarchies of the status quo (446). Within composition curricula, cultural hierarchies are manifested in a variety of ways, and offer opportunities for instructors to invite critical analysis of socio-cultural norms that are revealed through language practices.

The “first space” identified by Gutierrez, et al. is the site at which canonical texts are taught in order to convey “bluntly and other times quite subtly, who has power, which texts matter, and which ways with words [as Shirley Brice Heath demonstrated in 1983] have prestige and power as they concomitantly learn that their language or dialect does not matter” (as quoted in Meyer 55). Gutierrez et al. describe the “second space” as the comfortable place outside of school where the language of the community is exercised. The “third space” described by Gutierrez et al. is the focus of this chapter because it describes the social space where contestation takes place as the language of the status quo vies with a student’s home language (446). This “third space,” as researcher Rick Meyer argues, allows for issues regarding the intersections of “language, curriculum, and more” to materialize for students and instructors. There, the conflict between language and cultural expectations and identity are contested, challenged, perhaps even resisted (Meyer

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Chapter Four encapsulates the “third space” effects of Black Nationalism in student resistance to “standard” English in favor of Black English. As exemplified in Chapter Four, the confines of the college composition classroom offer up interstitial space for student identity to come in contact with the hierarchy accorded to “standard” English. The intersection of home language and “standard” English is complicated through an appreciation of power structures inherent in the classroom, and in the culture beyond institutional borders. SRTOL functions as an intermediary in interrupting that complication through the gateway of critical education. Michele Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish* how power relations are learned through practices that are communally learned and transmitted as “valuable.” Received cultural values, including the opinions regarding the use of a prestige dialect, are internalized and comprise essential elements of personal identity. Earlier chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated the valorization of prescriptive approaches in composition pedagogy that existed prior to the SRTOL Resolution. These prescriptive practices deeply characterize a Foucaultian concept of the power of cultural transmission and the ideological underpinnings that inform it. Because, as Guiterrez et al. emphasize, “power is not unidirectional; it is complex and surfaces in many ways,” power relations—such as that characterized in the argument over a student’s home language versus “standard” English—appear to be apolitical, ahistorical and even neutral (450). However, Chapters Two and Three demonstrate the tensions between the “old” traditional way of teaching composition through prescriptivist methodologies and the “new” and more progressive emphasis on linguistic descriptivism. The disagreement regarding prescriptivists and their descriptivist counterparts began shortly after the turn of the twentieth century and
persisted in earnest through the mid-twentieth-century. The historicity that informs the avenues of acceptance of the SRTOL are paved with the political, and as Chapter Two illustrates, hegemonic overtones. Political theorist Paulo Freire demonstrates in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, that education is never a neutral process; it is a political process. In context of SRTOL, the emphasis upon prescriptive methodologies in composition pedagogy is akin to silencing the voices of students who come to the academy lacking facility with “standard” English.

It is within this counter-hegemonic struggle that instructors have the opportunity to “build on the language practices and literacy acts within students’ in-school and out-of-school worlds” (Kinloch, “Power, Politics” 89) in order to examine and critique implicit power structures evinced in and through our common language. An example is Chapter Five’s rhetorical analysis of content from the Conference on College Composition and Communication journal in which terminology such as “ghetto Negro” served as an all-encompassing descriptor for Black students in the early nineteen seventies. This scenario serves to underscore what educational research specialist Carol D. Lee describes as examples of webs of power dynamics “within the human family that are inextricably tied to relationships of power and dominance” (3). A professional journal categorizing all African American students as “ghetto Negroes” embodies blatant cultural assumptions that are rhetorical in nature for the persuasive negative attitudes the rhetorical acts implies.

In the essay “Why We Need to Re-Think Race and Ethnicity in Educational Research,” Lee examines terminology frequently used in academic publications such as “culturally deprived” and “culturally disadvantaged” to parse the codes that each set of
assumptions imply. Terms such as “ghetto Negro” used commonly in the late mid-century and contemporary identifiers including “culturally-deprived/disadvantaged” and “at-risk” positions minority group members in hegemonic opposition to the status quo, and “inadvertently communicates the assumptions of privilege against which we argue” (Lee 3). The salient point in understanding the rhetorical nature of terms is their persuasive power in negatively positioning groups against the perceived norm, and the implications of such actions. Lee concludes: “This negative positioning can lead some to perceive tensions between their identities as members of a community and what they view as the demands of schools” (4). Lee’s scholarship is useful in understanding what is at stake when SRTOL is disregarded in modern contexts. While it is compositionists’ responsibility to guide students toward facility with LWC, it is important that the home language of students is not “thrown under the bus” in service to the status quo. As Bruch and Marback argue, “academic knowledge always already exists in political relationship with the broader cultural and historical circumstances of its production” (“Race Identity” 267). Chapter Four describes the interconnectedness of politics, culture, and identity as constituent elements within writing instruction. In consideration of the viability of SRTOL in the twenty-first century, it is imperative that compositionists open up spaces for dialogue in college classrooms to interrogate competing ideological positions regarding language issues in order to better understand SRTOL’s function as an interruption to the status quo through critical education.

Bruch and Marback contend “opposition and indifference to ‘Students’ Right’ gives expression to culturally powerful and institutionally sanctioned ways of negotiating language, race, identity, education, and justice that have yet to unthink the privilege of
white America” (268). Effective implementation of SRTOL includes inviting social justice into the writing classroom and cultivating awareness of the specter of white privilege in language practice and pedagogy.

**Engaging with Students’ Rights**

While much of this project reflects upon the historical forces and the strong opinions accompanying the adoption of SRTOL, the remainder of this chapter considers the intersection of SRTOL with theories and praxis that scholars are implementing towards the goal of appreciating linguistic diversity through writing. While Smitherman and others bemoan the fact that the SRTOL did not live up to their expectations of fulfilling racial justice in the writing classroom, the Resolution was instrumental in pointing to the need for change relative to attitudes regarding the prevalence of monolingualism. Although the possibilities for SRTOL were “always imagined and yet never fully achieved,” (Kynard 361) the Resolution was effective in rousing composition from its hibernation amid the larger culture’s struggle for racial and social equality.

Stephen Parks situates composition as “the 59 developing sector in the humanities . . . [for its role in] expand[ing] the university’s legitimating function to an increasing set of dialects, communities, and knowledges” (214). Compositionists, Parks generalizes, “felt responsible for society’s attitudes toward language” and were compelled to use their positions to “change society’s attitudes” (214). While a detailed accounting of the myriad ways in which SRTOL has affected modern composition pedagogy is beyond the scope of this project, the most enduring legacy of SRTOL concerns the transformation of the discipline of composition studies from a point of relative stasis to an increased

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59 Emphasis is Parks’s.
understanding of language. This evolution is evidenced through modern pedagogical shifts away from prescriptivism toward critical pedagogy.

One of the most significant effects of SRTOL was the heightened sense of the social dimensions of language that the Resolution highlighted; as consequence, SRTOL allowed student writers the “permission” to push beyond the parameters of what was once considered acceptable to explore and employ new rhetorical strategies including the use of African American Vernacular English. Gilyard and Elaine Richardson note that although “there was never a shortage of ideas about how SRTOL could be implemented beyond a liberal pluralist paradigm,” the Resolution was pointedly lacking in empirical models” (39). Similar to a paper recovered from Juanita Williamson’s eponymous archive entitled “To Make Them Promising,” Gilyard and Richardson pose pedagogical solutions in their essay, “Students’ Right to Possibility” to guide instructors in innovative methods designed to enable students as they “negotiate the structures of academic schooling” (39). Richardson and Gilyard affirm the deep connection between a person’s language of nurture and identity when they argue, “most African Americans feel a need to reaffirm their African American selves, individually and collectively. This is often accomplished primarily through language, as is evident in the rich tradition of African American literacy” (“Students’ Right” 40). Part of Richardson and Gilyard’s praxis in implementing tenets of SRTOL includes encouraging the student to embrace their ethnic identity as a means to develop literacy skills along with critical consciousness (40). After identifying fifteen stylistic characteristics of Black-dominated discourse (including rhythmic phrasing, signifying, conversant tone, cultural references, ethno-linguistic idioms, and verbal inventiveness), Richardson and Gilyard developed assignments in
which students were encouraged to use the rhetorical patterns typical of Black dialect in their own writing. Patterns for assignments were taken from portions of *Talkin and Testifyin*, in which Smitherman adroitly vacillates between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and “standard” English in the text; rap lyrics, enslavement narratives, and African American literature also provide rich material. Richardson and Gilyard encouraged their students to view “Black discourse patterns from an analytical point of view” in order to identify some of the fifteen “Black discourse styles” previously studied (43). The purpose of cultivating student awareness of an “analytical pedagogical approach is to “implement the principles of SRTOL as it concerns the teaching of writing to African American students . . . to address the central question of to what extent African American speech styles can be instrumental to the development of critical academic writing” (Richardson and Gilyard 39). Activities that Richardson and Gilyard employed included examining rhetorical devices in a variety of literature ranging from slave narratives to Sister Souljah’s book, *No Disrespect*. Using these works as models emboldened their students to experiment with Black discourse and the use of rhetorical patterns in their own prose as exemplified by the texts Richardson and Gilyard offered for critique (43). Gilyard and Richardson theorize that in recognizing AAVE as a dialect equal to other dialectal varieties, the possibility of representing AAVE’s role “in creative, intellectually engaging, persuasive, and at times revolutionary discourse” is enlarged (39). Gilyard and Richardson’s pedagogical strategies are certainly not the only innovative ones that engage the principles of SRTOL, but they are representative examples of methodologies that are successful.
The Overlap: SRTOL and Critical Discourse Analysis

The linguistic turn has had demonstrable and lasting effects on theories and praxis relating to composition instruction. The linguistic turn, as I apply the term, describes the application of linguistic science to epistemologies relating to composition instruction beginning around the mid-twentieth century. Through an alliance with linguistic science, composition lifted itself beyond the drudgery once associated with the generation of frazzled freshman composition instructors likely shepherded by Fred Newton Scott at the turn of the twentieth century to become a viable discipline with a research agenda all its own. This re-visioning is attributable in part to the departure from reliance upon prescriptivist pedagogies toward interdisciplinary cooperation between philosophers, anthropologists, linguists and compositionists in coming to a deeper appreciation that discourse is so much more than “right” or “wrong” according to nineteenth century ideals of taste. Rather, language is the highly complex nexus of history, society, culture, ideology, and power; the SRTOL Resolution was crucial in concretizing this distinction. In the section which follows, I consider a modern corollary of SRTOL, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in order to explore how SRTOL and CDA move students to examine power dynamics in public and private domains—a skill whose worth cannot be underestimated in the divisive political climate ushered in the immediate aftermath of the post-Obama presidential administration.

As Berlin notes in *Rhetoric and Reality*, the discipline of rhetoric and composition has been instrumental in fostering a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of culture, language, class, and power structures. Linguistics, as a complement to writing instruction, was essential in fostering an appreciation for the social basis of language, “and the class
structure upon which it is based” (135). In taking into account linguistics and class, it is helpful to recall Berlin’s definition ideology from a rhetorical perspective. According to Berlin, “ideology provides the language to define the subject (the self), other subjects, the material world, and the relation of all of these to each other. Ideology is thus inscribed in language practices, entering all features of our experience” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 479). In considering pedagogical strategies that closely embrace the essence of the SRTOL Resolution, CDA, as an overlapping approach to language study, is a strong representative. Critical Discourse Analysis seeks to “explore hidden power relations between a piece of discourse and wider social and cultural formations” and has an interest in “uncovering inequality, power relationships, injustices, discrimination, bias, etc.” (Corson 95). While a variety of extant resources regarding CDA exist for further exploration, CDA is a focus of the latter section of this chapter for its emphasis upon the role of ideology that is embedded in communicative practices.

Ideology, as defined by Berlin, is a crucial distinction linking CDA to SRTOL. As Henry Giroux explains, a heterogeneous society features unequal power relations not only between races, but differing classes, sexes, or ethnic and religious groups. Linguistic minorities who are learning a dominant language—such as “standard” English—are “never free from these unequal relations of power because language teaching and learning is not a neutral practice but a highly political one” (Giroux as quoted in Rogers 3). Ruth Wodak, one of the progenitors of the emerging discipline of CDA, defines the approach as “fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is
expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized, etc. by language use (or in discourse) . . . Consequently, three concepts figure indispensably in all CDA; the concept of power, the concept of history, and the concept of ideology” (“Critical Linguistics” 205). Wodak’s conflation of power, history, and ideology are significant for this project because they are associated with the primary concerns of SRTOL. As Chapter Five iterates, the historicity which informs a dialect is a reflection of a collective past and a heritage that is deserving of respect, not derision. The SRTOL Resolution tacitly acknowledges the historical dimensions of language while opposing ideologies (such as prescriptivism) that would elide dialectal differences in service to power structures that benefit privileging one way of speaking or writing over another. Similarly, CDA draws on social theory and the work of European theorists Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Karl Marx in the examination of the ways in which power relations and ideologies are embedded in discourse. For example, David Holmes observes: “like Michel Foucault, the writers of The Student’s Right to Their Own Language consider knowledge—in this case, the privileging of Standard American English—the reflection of the hierarchy of power” (58). The scholarship and pedagogical methods offered by Smitherman, Williamson, Bailey, Gilyard, Richardson and a host of others have benefitted composition immensely through their resistance to dominant ideologies and their engagement with SRTOL or the principles that informed its development.

Picking up on the threads of scholarship authored by the aforementioned writers, contemporary researchers are driven by an interest in critical pedagogy as manifested through CDA. Thomas Huckin, Jennifer Andrus, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon note, “the immediate forerunner of CDA was critical linguistics (CL), a largely linguistic approach
to text analysis developed in the United Kingdom” (108). Huckin et al. write that CDA branched beyond CL through its incorporation of social, cognitive, and rhetorical theories largely influenced by British linguist M.A.K. Halliday, whose views regarding the social dimensions of language continue to influence the young field of CDA to the present (Huckin et al. 108). Wodak traces CDA’s emergence as a discipline to a 1991 Amsterdam symposium in which the field’s founders—Wodak, Gunther Kress, Teun van Dijk, and Theo van Leeuwen met over the course of two days discussing theories and methodologies regarding the implementation of practices of CDA (Wodak 186).

It is at the junction of CDA and the disciplines of linguistics and composition that history, ideology, and power again intersect in rhetoric and composition. Just as interdisciplinary cooperation between composition and the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology were pivotal in providing momentum for drastic changes in composition instruction as noted in Chapter Two, composition continues to benefit from interdisciplinary alliances with disciplines outside of its own. CDA has its roots in European post-structuralist thought including the Frankfurt School and its emphasis on “the linking of social and political engagement with a sociologically informed construction of society” (Krings as quoted in Wodak (187). The social, the political, and the cultural converge through language, and enable students and researchers to take a critical approach to the study of communication in order to “make visible the interconnectedness of things” (Fairclough 747). Fairclough’s description of CDA as a vital approach in revealing the “interconnectedness of things” has significant implications for archival research, which Huckin et al. describe as “making extensive use of rhetorical analysis of complex longitudinal studies and institutional histories, ethnographic methods
and large archival corpora” (109). Because much of what (little) is known of Juanita Williamson comes from my own archival research, CDA as a research paradigm is of particular interest in making connections that accurately bring to light the contributions of historical figures such as Williamson to human history—histories that might otherwise be left to the dusty darkness of an archival tomb. As Huckin et al. observe, CDA is “a powerful new methodology for rhetoric and composition, leading to unusually rich and versatile research. Rhetoric/composition has always been an interdisciplinary endeavor, borrowing from areas as diverse as literacy studies, computer technology, sociolinguistics, communication, and cultural studies to supplement the core discipline” (Huckin 110). The unseen ideological power behind spoken and written discourse has long been the locus of studies of composition and rhetoric as scholars continue to study the persuasive power of language as it is replicated and reproduced. Because literate activity, Charles Bazerman argues, “is associated with forms of belief, commitment, and consciousness that shape modern personality” . . . occup[ying] much of the day of people in modern society” Bazerman advocates the continued importance of the study of writing because “writing provides some of the fundamental mechanisms that make our world work” (34). CDA is useful in continuing our inquiry into the complexities of writing and the historical, political, and ideological dimensions that inform the deceptively simple, yet highly complex act of communication.

Bazerman posits that three syntheses—the historical, the theoretical, and the practical “tell the same story, for the theory is an attempt to understand how we live our lives at the unfolding edge of history, using literacy in ways that make the most sense for us in our lives, to continue to make a future from our own skills and choices as writers,”
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(35). New wrinkles in the approaches to better understanding the correlation of the cultural forces that affect and influence, inform, and impact writing instruction broaden our discipline and our work as instructors.

Sociolinguists Wodak and Norman Fairclough insist that CDA is a paradigm (rather than a pedagogy) characterized by a set of principles that closely parallel the tenets of SRTOL—including these cited by Wodak and Fairclough in their 1996 essay, *Discourse as Social Action*:

- CDA addresses social problems.
- Discourse does ideological work.
- Discourse constitutes society and culture.
- Power relations are discursive.
- The link between text and society is mediated.
- Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory.
- Discourse is historical.
- Discourse is a form of social action (271-80).

Huckin et al. maintain, “Another point of overlap between CDA and rhetoric/composition is concerned with civic engagement and the ethical uses of language, utilizing CDA to reveal specific ways in which language use reflects power inequalities” (113). One example is Huckin’s enactment of CDA in writing pedagogy through student correspondence to their respective legislators. Students subsequently analyzed their legislator’s response, including replies that were clearly form letters. Huckin writes of the assignment: “By using a variety of discourse-analytic and rhetorical concepts (genre, textual silences, interdiscursivity, insinuation, pronoun use, face work,
relevance theory) he [Huckin] exposes a fundamental incoherence and a condescending, nondemocratic stance in the legislator’s letter” (Huckin et al. 113). Through Huckin’s legislative exercise, students were taken into a “real world” dialogic experience in order to decode and analyze the communicative exchange and the ways in which power and language intersect. CDA is similarly useful in analyzing the discourses of a wealth of disciplines, including disability studies, and professions ranging from law, religion, and higher education. I suggest the usefulness of CDA in encouraging students to analyze historical documents such as correspondence and treaties between the U.S. government and the Indigenous Peoples from a rhetorical perspective in order to analyze the “structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control when these are manifested in language” (Huckin et al. 107). Intertwining the principles of SRTOL in imagining the socio-cultural dimensions of language through CDA has possibilities that could expand the study of language beyond the classroom into a plethora of institutional domains. As Rogers argues, “CDA is a broad framework that brings critical social theories into dialogue with theories of language to answer particular research questions”—research questions that have yet to be written (3).

The Interconnectedness of Things: Antiracist Writing Assessment and Raciolinguistics as Modern Manifestations of SRTOL

Critical Discourse Analysis, and its interrogation of the concepts of power, the history, and ideology in the critique of language practice offers scholars a means through which to honor the spirit of SRTOL into the twenty-first century. Although Geneva Smitherman’s comment that SRTOL “did not go far enough in practice” (Talkin that Talk 391) is echoed by Michael Pennell, who suggested that NCTE and CCCC were in a sense
“paying gallant lip service to language awareness in the composition classroom,”
(Pennell 229) contemporary scholars continue to enact principles of linguistic plurality in
the college writing classroom through their theories and praxis. Pennell insists that apart
from effective pedagogical strategies, SRTOL risks “becom[ing] a hypocritical, rhetorical
ghost with no substance below the ink and paper” (229). In an attempt to circumvent the
ghostly relegation of SRTOL to the ethereal void, this section briefly outlines anti-racist
pedagogical strategies as another contemporary response to the stated goals of SRTOL.
Prior to Smitherman and Pennell’s dour pronouncements of the survivability of SRTOL,
scholars have endeavored to implement pedagogical strategies geared toward linguistic
pluralism, many of which feature critical pedagogy in language instruction. In his 2010
essay, “A Rhetoric of Shuttling Between Languages,” Canagarajah emphasizes the
important connection of critical pedagogy to writing instruction. He argues: “we should
make students sensitive to the dominant conventions in each rhetorical context,” and “we
must also teach them to critically engage with them” (Canagarajah “Rhetoric” 177).
Although a wealth of ideas exist on pedagogical strategies aimed toward linguistic
inclusion in the modern classroom, anti-racist writing assessment can be viewed as one
manifestation of the broader goals of the SRTOL Resolution.

Focusing on the scholarship of Asao Inoue, an early advocate of anti-racist
writing assessment, scholars of rhetoric and composition may benefit from a deeper
understanding of rhetorics of difference to appreciate “the ways race and racism function
in writing assessment . . . [and] epitomize larger questions around fairness and justice”
(5). Because, as Inoue asserts, racism is “a phenomenon easily translatable to other social
phenomena that come from other kinds of diversity” that by extension reaches extend
beyond linguistic differences to include variations such as religion, disability, gender, ethnic, class, economic, or political dissimilarities, racism can be viewed as a power dynamic that has ideological constraints of varying degrees. Similar to the aims of CDA, Inoue asserts the importance of the recognition of the ways in which race functions within the context of race upon language, and on the ways in which those differences may be realized in context of writing instruction and assessment. As noted earlier, Fairclough emphasizes the need to “make visible the interconnectedness of things” in an analytical approach to language studies. (747). Similarly, Inoue reads classroom assessment “as an ecology with explicit features, namely a quality of more than, interconnectedness among everything and everyone in the ecology, and an explicit racial politics that students must engage with” (9). Inoue identifies what he terms white racial *habitus* to explore how race is not only fixed as a social construct in culture but is mirrored in writing assessment. In a truncated overview of the first two chapters of Inoue’s insightful text, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*, he essentially intones the arguments laid by the early advocates of the SRTOL Resolution: race and language are connected. In this nexus, “standard” Academic English (SAE) is privileged in American classrooms; as such, white-middle class hegemonic values are instantiated, controlled and reproduced through SAE. Individuals who use variances of SAE are devalued in context of those who do.

Borrowing from the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, Buddhist theories of interconnection, and Marxist political theory, Inoue recognize a heterogeneous classroom

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60 For a detailed explication of this topic, see Asao Inoue’s *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*.

61 All aspects of this sentence are original to Inoue.
as an “ecology” which possesses an inherent connection to people and things (77). In subverting the privilege of instructor authority, Inoue’s ecology seeks to mirror the Freireian concept of “critical consciousness,” which “is the active questioning of what seem to be the governing beliefs of a culture” (Covino 221). Through means such as grading contracts and equalizing principles of writing assessment that value a student’s home language on par with “standard” English, Inoue challenges students to interrogate the differentials in power relationships in our culture and in our institutional settings, including the college writing classroom. Inoue further emphasizes the interconnectivity of all students in the learning process, and each participant/stakeholder’s role in “making [the assessment ecology] livable, fair, and sustainable” in a complex and ever-changing surround (80). Part of Inoue’s anti-racist pedagogy mission seeks to contradict the myth of the superiority of “standard” English over other language varieties—a mission he asserts is fraught with racial bias.

Just as Inoue conflates race as a constituent of assessment ecology, Samy Alim, John Rickford and Arnetha Ball view race as a central element to the emerging field of raciolinguistics. Defined as “the interdisciplinary field of ‘language and race’” (5), raciolinguistics is “dedicated to bringing to bear diverse methods of linguistic analysis to ask and answer critical questions about the relations between language, race, and power across diverse ethnoracial contexts and societies” (3). In its examination of “how language shapes race and how race shapes language,” raciolinguistics is a developing, interdisciplinary field that draws on research from anthropology, education, and

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62 Inoue’s pedagogy is offered in substantially more detail in “Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies” the second chapter of Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future.
linguistics to better understand the connections between race and language. Because language has and will likely always remain a principle means of differentiation among people groups, “it is only recently that there has been a focused, collective effort to theorize race and ethnicity within and across language studies” (Alim 5). Accordingly, raciolinguistics explores language and its role in shaping ethnoracial identity. Raciolinguistics, as a field of study, represents perhaps the most distinct contemporary manifestation of SRTOL through its scholars’ efforts to demonstrate the undeniable link of identity and language as it is continuously replicated in a culture.

Although the intersections of race, language, and culture have long attracted the interest of scholars across the disciplines, raciolinguistics seeks to theorize language studies specifically through the lens of race. While most scholars may readily acknowledge race as a social construct, raciolinguistics theorizes the performative aspects of language as people “do” race interactively (Alim et al. 5). Informed by a social constructivist perspective on race combined with theories of the impactful nature of racism upon those who experience its reality, raciolinguistics seeks to interrogate the ways in which the social processes of language and race “mediate and mutually constitute each other” (Alim 3). Specifically, raciolinguistics theorizes the following:  

- the analysis of language and race as a connected social process in order to highlight the relationship between language, race and power;

- how minute features of language are constructed, styled and performed as ethnoracial identities through varied modes of interaction;

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- the intersectional approaches that understand race as always produced in conjunction with axes of difference that include class, gender, sexuality, religion;

- the role of language in maintaining and challenging racism as a global system of capitalistic oppression in ethnoracial and linguistic contexts;

- the linguistic and discursive construction of race and ethnicity while noting their endurance as social realities for subjugated oppressed groups such as racial and ethnic minorities;

- the complexities of racialization within the rapidly changing demographic shifts and technological advances of the twenty-first century (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube);

- the implications of research for social transformation for the purposes of developing various anti-racist strategies that impact public discourse on language, race, and education. (Alim 5-6)

As Inoue has articulated, anti-racist writing assessment is one means through which to view language through the lens of race with the goal of transforming the classroom from one in which the mimicry of “standard” English is rewarded at the expense of their home language varieties. Inoue’s anti-racist writing assessment, the field of raciolinguistics, and the practice of CDA represent ways in which to recognize the power differentials that exist within our society, our institutions, and our political economy—all of which are interconnected through language.

**Concluding Thoughts**

It is fitting that this dissertation concludes within the context of interconnectivity, because writing and language are the threads that unite experience with expression,
passion with purpose, and rhetoric with our versions of reality. Key relationships such as those that exist between a culture and its consumers of education—form webs that are inextricably linked through writing instruction. Beginning with the undeniable role that cultural influences perpetually wield over writing pedagogies, this dissertation began by highlighting the tensions between prescriptivism and the more progressive linguistic descriptivists. The tensions between the prescriptivist and descriptivist camps became more pronounced due to changes in the student demographic and the contributions of linguistic science that served as a complement to writing instruction. As the mission of colleges changed from sites of “character” indoctrination of privileged male elites to institutions supplying training concomitant with post-World War economic and cultural values, descriptivism, bolstered by the science of linguistics, effectively embodied a move away from traditionalism in writing pedagogy in favor of a perspective that gradually recognized the value of heterogeneousness. The gradual separation from prescriptivism and its strict adherence to perceptions of “correctness” in language and in dialect reflected growing undercurrents in American society. As linguistics continued its influence upon composition instruction, the hegemonic undertones of prescriptivism became particularly conspicuous with the successes of the long civil rights movement and the end of segregation in public colleges and schools. At late mid-century, college composition instructors were challenged not only in teaching students whose dialect and skins reflected unfamiliar diversity, but they were tasked with re-thinking the ideology behind prescriptivism and its role as a mechanism of perpetuating oppression through language gate-keeping.
Once again, linguistics offered a link through which students who, marginalized through decades of oppression, could contrast their home dialect with that of the status quo as a means through which to facilitate their success with the so-called “standard.” Beryl Bailey and Juanita Williamson were pioneers in using methods such as contrastive analysis borrowed from their training as non-white linguists in teaching “standard” English to Black students. In showing a student the structure of her own language and that of “standard” English, students were able to alternate between the dialect of their home and the language of the academy. Composition’s alliance with linguistics allowed for a rebirth of the field from a discipline once governed by outdated notions of belletristic “taste” to a discipline that leads the way in embracing democracy in education, realized in part through the SRTOL Resolution and its call to fully embrace the linguistic turn and the many dialects of English that can, and must coexist in a pluralistic society.

As we look to the challenges of the past, this dissertation likewise challenges readers, researchers, instructors, and students to work toward a continued cultivation of the ways that writing is used to oppress and marginalize. In so doing, we honor the SRTOL Resolution charge in the hope that it will “enable [us, as teachers] to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language”\(^\text{64}\) as we collectively advocate social and racial equality in the college writing classroom—and beyond.

\(^{64}\text{Students’ Right to Their Own Language Resolution, passed by the Conference on College Composition Executive Committee in 1972, and its membership in 1974.}\)
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