

# The Inevitability of “Standard” English: Discursive Constructions of Standard Language Ideologies

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## **Abstract**

Although standard language ideologies have been well researched and theorized, the practices that lead to the reproduction and enactment of these ideologies deserve attention. Specifically, there remains a need to study language that both reveals reliance on standard language ideologies and perpetuates these ideologies within the field of writing studies, undermining the field's efforts to challenge standard English's ongoing privileged position. This article examines the role of language in perpetuating perceptions of standard English as linguistically neutral regardless of personal or field-wide views about linguistic equality and the value of linguistic diversity. Specifically, I describe the discursive practices of standard language ideologies—what I term standard language discourse—that allow for a positioning of standard English as normal, natural, non-interfering, and widely accessible. Finally, I explore how to resist or challenge this positioning.

## **Keywords**

standard language ideologies, standard English, writing studies, composition, neutrality

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Like many in the field of writing studies, my professional aims include increasing access to higher education for often-underrepresented social groups by challenging the pervasive, dominant role of standard edited American English (SEAE) in writing theory and pedagogy. In the 40 years since the Conference on College Composition and Communication adopted “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language” (SRTOL), scholars continue to struggle with enacting the resolution on their own campuses, in their own departments or programs, and even in their own classrooms. Despite ongoing scholarship on the topic, part of the challenge of enacting SRTOL seems to be the perceived inevitability of SEAE. The assumption remains that SEAE will always be taught—to some degree—in writing classrooms. (See Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur [2011] and Perryman-Clark [2013] for examples of scholarship that call for inclusion of other languages/dialects in writing curricula but also acknowledge the necessity of continuing to teach SEAE to some degree.) This assumption both relies on and perpetuates standard language ideologies that advance beliefs about one, stable, correct language variety that is a superior and, therefore, commonsense dialect for school, business, and public settings. Although standard language ideologies have been well researched and theorized, the practices that lead to the reproduction and enactment of these ideologies deserve attention. Specifically, there remains a need to study the language that both reveals writing studies’ reliance on standard language ideologies and perpetuates standard language ideologies within the field, undermining our efforts to challenge SEAE’s position.

## Literature Review

### *Standard Language Ideologies and SEAE*

According to Rumsey (1990), language ideologies, broadly speaking, are common ways of understanding language that become naturalized and largely invisible (qtd. in Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 57). In the case of standard language ideologies, the common understandings center on beliefs about superiority and correctness. Specifically, standard language ideologies allow for the belief in one, identifiable and stable language variety that is inherently correct and, relatedly, leads to better communication among the masses (Milroy, 1999). Silverstein (1996) argues that there is an assumption of widespread support for the standard, which works to hide other power interests in particular language varieties (pp. 288, 290). This widespread support is associated with both correctness and the perception of the standard as unaffiliated. Cameron (1995) explains that standard language ideologies position

standard languages as language that anyone can use and that won't influence the meaning of the communication (p. 120). According to Silverstein (1996), standard languages also have to be perceived as widely available, accessible, and attainable (p. 291) in order to be fully endorsed and hide power relations. Indeed, standard language varieties must be perceived as unaffiliated: *All* groups stand to benefit from using the standard language variety, and no group has more access than any other to the standard language. This positioning hides standard languages' role in hegemony: The common understandings of and about SEAE not only benefit those who have power but also shield those in power—as well as SEAE—from critique.

Many scholars have dedicated their work to making the hegemony of SEAE clear, arguing for the value and necessity of multiple language varieties. Perhaps the most well known example of this work in writing studies is the SRTOL resolution, which clearly states that privileging SEAE as the only acceptable language and dialect in writing classrooms “amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another” (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974, p. 3). (See Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, & Jackson [2014] for a full treatment of the impetus, reaction to, and ongoing scholarship on SRTOL.) In addition, Smitherman (2000), Jordan (1989), and Alim (2005) (and many other scholars) have persuasively described the harm of privileging SEAE and—in the process—denigrating other language varieties, such as African American English. In response to the hegemony of SEAE, some compositionists provide suggestions for how to enact SRTOL in the classroom (e.g., Kinloch, 2005; Perryman-Clark, 2013; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003), while others work to dismantle the boundaries between SEAE and nonstandard language varieties (e.g., Canagarajah, 2006; Young & Martinez, 2011). Finally, an increasing number of scholars (one of the most notable examples being Smitherman's entire body of work) challenge the notion that SEAE is the only dialect that can accomplish the work of academia.

Despite this important work, the ideological positioning of standard languages as singular, correct, superior, and universal is far-reaching and has influenced literacy education. According to Lippi-Green (1997), literacy education in our schools means the teaching and acceptance of SEAE (p. 104). The connection between schooling and standard languages is bidirectional: Schools teach and expect standard languages because they are superior and correct, and the fact that standard languages are taught and expected in schools allows for a perception of widespread availability of these privileged language varieties. While the perception of universal availability is most commonly associated with spoken language, it also applies to written language. For example, the assumption exists that whether or not students have exposure to

SEAE from their home environments, schools will provide access to this language variety as part of their equalizing function. As such, it's common sense to use SEAE in most settings, including writing classrooms.

### *SEAE in Writing Studies Scholarship*

Some scholars within writing studies have addressed the sense of inevitability and the common understandings surrounding SEAE by examining the expectation for monolingualism. In "English Only and US College Composition," Horner and Trimbur (2002) argue that college writing courses are designed around the ideal of English monolingualism (p. 594), which they critique by uncovering the beliefs and understandings that create the sense of inevitability (p. 596). Important to my argument in this article, Horner and Trimbur locate the origins of inevitability in the reification of SEAE and the curricular path (often a series of writing courses) students take to achieve mastery in SEAE and remove linguistic difference from their writing. Similarly, Matsuda (2006) examines the strong expectation for—if not the reification of—a standard monolingual student, arguing that the widespread acceptance of a monolingual writing curriculum creates the assumption that writing students are native speakers of standard English (p. 638). Even when linguistic diversity is acknowledged, nonstandard varieties are not given equal weight in the writing classroom. According to Canagarajah (2006), students may be allowed to use nonstandard varieties for informal writing but SEAE remains the default expectation for formal compositions. Finally, Lippi-Green (1997) exposes faulty logic that contributes to both the reification of SEAE and an end goal of students who write only in SEAE. She argues that educators believe they must teach this privileged language variety because other teachers and employers reject nonstandard languages. Lippi-Green then points out that the same set of facts—that all language varieties are linguistically equal, that discriminating against nonstandard language varieties is detrimental to the education of many students, that one language variety is privileged by employers and educators—could lead to a different conclusion: that teachers and employers must learn to accept other language varieties and stop privileging only one (p. 113). All of these scholars draw important attention to the ideologies that inform writing pedagogies and practices related to SEAE.

In this article, I join these scholars (and others) in working to challenge the narrowly defined written standardness still privileged and deemed inescapable in writing curricula. I argue that the assumptions and beliefs that allow for expectations of monolingualism are intimately related to rhetorical constructions of SEAE as linguistically neutral. This article examines the role of

language in perpetuating perceptions of SEAE as linguistically neutral regardless of personal or field-wide views about linguistic equality and the value of linguistic diversity. I draw on IRB-approved interviews with writing instructors about student papers to identify and critique features of what I call standard language discourse (SLD)—the language of standard language ideologies that perpetuate perceptions of both linguistic neutrality and linguistic superiority. Specifically, I describe the SLD features that allow for a positioning of SEAE as normal, natural, non-interfering, and widely accessible. Finally, I explore how to resist or challenge this positioning.

## **The Study**

### *Data Collection*

This study draws on interviews with eighteen writing instructors at three public, research universities—two in the Midwest and one in the Southwest. All of the instructors—the only instructors to volunteer at each institution—were White; there were 10 females and 8 males; and they reported socioeconomic statuses ranging from working class to middle class.

Instructors read and graded three anonymous student papers (randomly selected from a pool of nine papers) prior to the interview. I compiled my pool of nine student papers from essays written by incoming first-year students as part of a placement process at one of the study locations. The prompt asked students to read a published article and to write an “academic essay . . . [that] clearly articulate(s) a position and support(s) that position using evidence.” The prompt indicated that the essays would be evaluated for focus, structure, and evidence/analysis. Students received the prompt and submitted their essays online. I emailed students to ask for permission to use their papers and chose the first that agreed within the racial categories of White, Hispanic (students used this race label when self-identifying), and African American. These racial categories represent groups that traditionally have been privileged or, conversely, negatively evaluated based in part on language use. By chance, there were approximately the same number of male and female students (5 males and 4 females), and the students self-identified as coming from upper-middle-class backgrounds to working-class backgrounds. Because I was interested in instructors’ understandings of written standardness, I asked the directors of the writing center and writing program at one of the study locations—the only study location that used the assignment for placement purposes—to verify that the selected papers represented the range of writing they commonly see at their institution. Other than that, I did not evaluate the papers prior to selecting them for use in the study.

In other words, I did not screen papers for non/standard features. My goal in this project was not to try to anticipate how instructors would respond to various features in the texts; instead, I wanted to know what language was un/ marked, what kinds of identities the un/ marked language signaled, and how instructors would talk about identity and standardness when reading anonymous student texts.

During the interviews, I asked the instructors to describe the student-authors they pictured as having written the papers, to walk me through their comments to one of the papers, to explain common patterns in student writing that doesn't meet their expectations, to describe what was striking about each paper, and to then describe in detail the student-authors who may have written each paper. I asked follow-up questions to clarify responses and to ask instructors to indicate what in the text prompted particular responses. See the appendix for the full list of interview questions.

### *Data Analysis*

I coded the interview transcripts for un/ marked language, non/ standard writing, and perceptions of student-author identity. I focused on the first two categories, which are interrelated, for this analysis. For example, in response to the question "What was striking in this paper?" instructors often answered by noting either what students had done exceptionally well (e.g., organization, sentence structure, thesis statement) or what fell outside their expectations for good college writing (e.g., word choice, not having a thesis, mechanical errors). In either case, the language they called attention to was marked as either standard (though perhaps not the norm) or nonstandard. As another example, when instructors talked through their responses to one of the papers, they often commented both on what they perceived to be standard or nonstandard and connected their responses to larger patterns they see in student writing. One instructor, Carol, exemplifies this when she said, "this one . . . had trouble with verb tenses. And that's a—to me, that's a bad sign . . . that's, that's an inner city sign" (interview, December 10, 2009, Lines 349-350). In this instance, nonstandard subject verb agreement is negatively marked (it's "a bad sign") and is connected to a pattern she has noticed in "inner city" students. I coded this passage for marked language and nonstandardness (and identity, but that category is not relevant to the analysis I performed for this article).

I analyzed the data coded as non/ standard and un/ marked using a blend of discourse and rhetorical analysis by asking, "What expressions . . . of discourse give rise to what kind of inferences" (van Dijk, 1995, p. 143) and to what effect? More specifically, I asked, what kinds of discursive practices

constitute SEAE as linguistically neutral? During my analysis, I identified what I have termed standard language discourse (SLD), an ideological discourse that reflects and perpetuates standard language ideologies. According to Charland (1987), ideological discourse makes a topic seem not open for debate because of widespread agreement (p. 133). The givenness of ideological discourse is problematic in the way it can mask the rhetorical nature of understandings that seem to be common sense (Charland, 1987, p. 138). The blend of discourse and rhetorical analysis, then, is particularly well suited for examining ideological discourses in order to identify the ideologies and reposition them as rhetorical.

Focusing on language in this way allows me to examine the effects of language within a small sample size, revealing common discursive patterns. Importantly, this research can't be generalized to all writing instructors. Instead, its value rests in the ways it can teach us more about our own linguistic practices and how to look for damaging discursive features in our field's conversations about SEAE. Additionally, instructors' intentions are not factored into this analysis. This study aims to examine the effects of language use *regardless* of instructors' intentions or beliefs. As such, it is important to study language for evidence of ideologies and to examine the rhetorical effect of certain discursive constructions. Finally, one limitation of this study design rests in the anonymity of the student authors. Although writing instructors may encounter anonymous student texts (placement essays, portfolio assessments, AP essays, etc.), they are more likely to know the students whose texts they read and evaluate. Nonetheless, I assert that there is value to identifying and examining the discursive patterns I describe in this article to shed light on the discursive constructions and reproductions of standard language ideology.

## Findings

Throughout the interviews, instructors relied on SLD to position SEAE as normal, natural, non-interfering, and widely accessible, thereby constructing this dialect as linguistically neutral and perpetuating already existing perceptions of SEAE as inevitable in the writing classroom and curricula. The representation of these categories as discrete is artificial and misleading. Instead, the categories overlap, work together, influence, and inform one another. Nonetheless, in the sections that follow, I attempt to disentangle these four categories of linguistic neutrality in order to interrogate their individual definitions, construction, and implications. I argue the discursive practices revealed in this analysis not only create the rhetorical space for perceptions of linguistic neutrality but also are a manifestation of standard language

ideologies and, therefore, (re)produce powerful and enduring understanding of standard language.

The first two sections that follow—SEAE as normal and SEAE as natural—are closely related. Both perceptions of SEAE put this privileged dialect in a normative center against which other language varieties are valued and defined, often negatively. Furthermore, contrast is an important element in the construction of perceptions of SEAE as both normal and natural. Despite these similarities, the category of normalcy relies on assertions of sameness while perceptions of SEAE as natural can often be attributed to unexamined expectations and conventions.

### *Not a “Particular Dialect”: SEAE as Normal*

In the interviews with writing instructors, SEAE is treated as though it is normal; that is, the instructors represented this language variety as common and defined by sameness within the language use (unmarked language) and among language users (unmarked identities). In this project, implicit assertions of sameness associated with SEAE are largely visible in the unnamed norms, and that which is perceived to be different is located both outside of SEAE and outside of the rhetorically created social group. The following quotation from Richard offers an illustration of three forms of SLD that position SEAE as normal: designations of unmarkedness, contrast with other, and an absence of name or label. In this first example, the relationship between SEAE and author identity is made explicit as the instructor was responding to the question “What race do you think this student is?” Richard stated,

I don't, once again, see any obvious tip offs of any particular dialect or anything. Yeah. So it's really hard to tell. If I had to guess, I'd say white. I see a white female here, but that's, would I bet any money on it? . . . I mean, because that's the only thing you can go on. I mean I get, I mean I, like I said, you can't really tell. I mean, unless you get obvious tip offs. There's really no way of telling. And there are some fairly obvious tip offs, but if you don't get them then you can't. (interview, January 15, 2010, Lines 763-767, 772-779)

In the first line alone, Richard treats SEAE as unmarked (it doesn't have “any obvious tip offs”); contrasts it with a “particular” (and othered) language variety; and leaves it unnamed (it is simply *not* a “particular dialect”). These three SLD practices are not easily separated as they often work side by side—even constructing one another—in the positioning of SEAE as normal. Unmarkedness in this passage is related to both identity and dialect as Richard is specifically responding to a question about the student-author's race, but in

the process, positions the language as dialect-free and constituted through contrast. All of these features of SLD rely on a perception of sameness so as to make a name, label, or marking unnecessary, and contrast with “other” becomes the key means of identification. Indeed, the perception of sameness associated with SEAE is so strong that SEAE becomes universal and, in that universality, invisible (unmarked and unnamed). Positioning SEAE as universal is a key component in creating perceptions of neutrality and superiority and is linked to other features of SLD, particularly the act of positioning SEAE as widely accessible, which I describe later in this article.

Like Richard, 10 other instructors positioned SEAE as normal by not naming it, treating it as unmarked, and contrasting it with other, marked language use. The examples I offer here all come from excerpts in which the instructors were talking about the possible or perceived race of a student author. Melissa stated, “I think [the author’s] white . . . the lack of any, I don’t see any English as a foreign language problems. I don’t see any, as we said, any issues with any kind of cultural vernacular” (interview, April 2, 2010, Lines 337-338), Emily and Kelly “default[ed] to white” when “there [was] nothing indicating something else” (interview with Emily, April 16, 2010, Lines 601-602, 949), which Kelly described as “natural for white people to do” (interview, June 19, 2013, Line 595). Julie said, “I didn’t see any of those, like, non-standard English inflections . . . so, if I had to guess, white” (interview, February 5, 2010, Lines 683-684, 686). And finally, Chris said, “there are features [of Black Vernacular English] . . . that I don’t see in this draft” (interview, December 1, 2009, Lines 417-419). In all of these examples, the instructors noted what they didn’t see in the writing, thereby treating the language as unmarked and contrasting it with marked and sometimes named dialects. In these examples, there is a clear pattern in which unmarked language varieties or features signal sameness or unmarked identities—here, the absence of markedness indexes White student-authors and positions both the language and identity as normal. For a more detailed analysis of the indexicality of unmarkedness see my previous work on this topic (Davila, 2012). It is important to note, though, that two of the instructors from the southwestern university, a Hispanic-serving institution, defaulted to either a White *or* a Hispanic student when they encountered “typical” writing (interview with Kevin, March 28, 2013, Line 19).

Perceptions of absence (when it comes to language and identity) are a common sign of constructed normalcy, as what is perceived to be absence is actually sameness that is unnamed and normalized. For example, absence of a “particular dialect” does not mean that the language is truly dialect-free. Instead, the student is writing in an unnamed, normalized dialect: SEAE. The effect of treating SEAE as absent of dialect and a point of comparison for

other language varieties is to create both universality and invisibility, positioning this language variety firmly in the normative center. Just as the unnamed dialect can only be described in opposition to what is marked, non-standard language varieties are also recognized and defined in contrast to the unnamed, normative center. Finally, treating SEAE as unmarked and putting it in opposition with other further justifies SEAE operating as the normative center against which the other is compared and evaluated. This process, then, is self-perpetuating.

### *An “Innate Sense of Language”: SEAE as Natural*

Constructing SEAE as unmarked and unnamed creates the perception of this dialect as not only normal (or common and defined by sameness) but also natural. When a language variety is perceived to be natural, it is often also perceived to be so common and accepted, so inevitable that it is no longer recognized as a variety of language and simply becomes an unmarked, unnamed, and unmodified *language* associated with notions of correctness and functioning in the service of ideas or meaning. The two primary practices of SLD that contribute to SEAE as natural in this study are: not naming the standard and diverting attention away from language features and use. These forms of SLD mask awareness of the social construction and political implications of the conventions of SEAE, of SEAE being treated as a convention, and of linguistic difference that is othered and put in opposition to the supposed naturalness of SEAE.

The SLD practice of not naming the standard contributes to the perception of both a normal and natural language variety—one that need not be named in light of an assumption that the standard is obvious and common sense. However, as opposed to contrasting an unnamed SEAE with other dialects (as described in the previous section), instructors created perceptions of naturalness through general comments about language or grammar. Darrell and Richard stated that they expect their students to know the “conventions of the English language” (interview with Darrell, February 4, 2010, Lines 318-319) and to have an “innate sense of language” (Richard, Line 607) without specifying the variety of grammar or language they expect or teach. Within the larger context of the interviews, it is clear that both of these instructors were actually talking about SEAE as opposed to *any* dialect or language.

By not naming this dialect, these instructors (along with the rest of the instructors in this study) avoided addressing the cultural, political, and pedagogical implications of expecting, for example, that all students should have an “innate sense” of SEAE or that there is only one variety of “American English” that reflects “the way we write and speak and think” (interview with

Paige, May 2, 2013, Line 467). Additionally, the act of not naming SEAE reveals instructors' acceptance of this dialect being treated as a convention of specific genres or registers—especially when SEAE is reduced to grammar or sentence-level language features. Certainly these instructors would not have said that language varieties aside from SEAE are not language. Yet, they elided SEAE with these broader terms, suggesting that they perceive SEAE as natural—at least in the context of their classes and likely beyond.

In addition to not naming SEAE, many instructors (eight out of 18) diverted attention from this dialect—in effect, denying its importance—by focusing on the *ideas* within student papers. For example, Jonathon asserted that ideas are the most important part of student essays despite the striking “deficiencies of language” (interview, February 8, 2010, Line 751) he noted in two of the three student papers he read. This diversion of attention is a key feature of SLD that contributes to perceptions of naturalness by positioning language as something that can function from the background to communicate about, but not influence, ideas and meaning, thereby valuing ideas as more important than language. When instructors privilege ideas over language features and use, they can communicate an implied ideal that students produce correct, natural language that would allow instructors to focus solely on the content.

This treatment of language as independent from and in service of ideas creates rhetorical space for arguments of superior language varieties that don't interfere with meaning in their transmission of ideas. (I explore this feature of SLD in the next section.) Perhaps more importantly, though, suggesting that language doesn't matter, that it is the ideas we should focus on, is misleading and problematic for students who have not mastered these conventions as it both masks the power and importance associated with language and makes it less likely that instructors will prioritize language features in their instruction, despite their expectation for linguistic standardness. This approach to student papers effectively makes standardness a “culture of power” (Delpit, 1996, p. 282) with rules linked to and controlled by those in power—in this case, those who are responsible for demanding adherence to the rules and those who gained access to the culture of power tacitly.

A possible effect of treating SEAE as natural is othering that occurs when students' language use fails to meet common conventions and disrupts expectations for sameness. Alan and Kate both described nonstandard language as “weird” (interview with Alan, March 7, 2013, Line 608; interview with Kate, May 9, 2013, Line 383), and Darrell described “usage troubles” as “puzzling” (Lines 531-532). Darrell extended his evaluation of language use to language user when he stated, “I wasn't sure where [the student] had come up with that notion of this being a correct way to express themselves” (Lines

533-534). The reference to correctness signals Darrell's commitment to standardness. In this case, the writing strayed so far from his conception of what is standard that he was "puzzle[d]" by the student's language use. Darrell's acceptance of both the conventions of SEAE and SEAE as a convention in student writing led him to assume that the student thought his/her writing was "correct" (Line 534) and likely that the student was trying to write in a standard language variety (which may not have been the case). When his expectations weren't met, Darrell created distance between himself and the author by not understanding either the "usage troubles" or a context in which this kind of language use would be acceptable. Darrell's reaction to language that he perceived as different or other is not unique. Jonathon had a similar response to a student paper with many grammar and usage errors, calling these language features "strange" and wondering about their origin ("I would have to ask where that's coming from") (Lines 647-648). In both of these instances, the effect of positioning SEAE as natural is the othering of linguistic difference, treating it as unnatural ("puzzling" and "strange"), which leads to negative evaluations and protects the perceived naturalness of SEAE.

It's important to note that the othering I've just described could have been exacerbated by the anonymity of the student texts. In other words, instructors might not have been as "puzzle[d]" by nonstandard written features had they known the student author.

### *SEAE as Non-Interfering*

Positioning standard language as non-interfering is a common element of standard language ideologies, serving as partial justification for why standard languages are superior to other language varieties and more appropriate for public language use. The metaphor of clarity, a feature of SLD, is a commonplace in talking about student writing and represents the belief that writing can contain but not interfere with or influence meaning and ideas. Indeed, clear writing implies transparency on the part of language that allows writers to precisely transmit ideas and meaning to an audience. This likening of language to an ideally translucent container for ideas, meaning, thought, and so on sets up dialect as either functioning properly (not interfering with access to the ideas, etc.) or obstructing meaning.

All but one instructor in this study referred to clear writing or clarity of ideas at least once, and often more, during the interviews. The metaphor of clarity relies on several other, already-introduced features of SLD and aspects of perceived neutrality, most notably not naming the standard and diverting attention from language features. When positioning language as transparent, instructors in this study never named this language as standard or SEAE and

implicitly discouraged the study of language features because language is simply a means to an end: the expression of ideas and meaning.

At times, instructors referred to sentence-level difference as an impediment to meaning, suggesting that if students could clean up their “muddy” sentences (Carol, Line 415), the meaning and ideas would be more accessible. Indeed, whether or not the instructors explicitly called on the metaphor of clarity when talking about grammar and usage, statements about language interfering with meaning or the importance of ideas over language often rely on the same conception of language as a vessel. In my interview with Darrell, he repeatedly used the phrase “clarity of thought,” explaining the relationship between language and ideas as such:

I find that many students, even if they're having trouble expressing their ideas in a complex way, many times won't be able to express their ideas clearly . . . because if [clarity] doesn't exist on that sentence level, I think . . . the cumulative effect is sort of a fuzziness in terms of what the focus is, what the approach is. (Lines 264-266, 275-277)

The metaphor of clarity as used in this passage creates a perception of linguistic neutrality that aligns with and reproduces standard language ideologies—specifically the notion that standard languages are superior to nonstandard languages, in part because of the assumed fact that they will not unduly impact the outcome of communication (Cameron, 1995, p. 120).

In addition to the reference to clarity in this study, the ideology of language as a container dates back to ancient rhetoric and is visible in contemporary practices (on rubrics and in textbooks) and outside of writing studies (in expressions such as “put it in writing” and references to writing having content or containing ideas). Treating language like a container carries an assumption that content is more important than the medium through which it is delivered and, more importantly, that language does not influence meaning or content; language can impede or enhance access to meaning, but it does not interact with the meaning itself. This perspective of the function of written language serves as partial justification for the superiority of the standard and is integral to standard language ideologies.

### *SEAE as Widely Accessible*

The final feature of SLD, positioning SEAE as widely accessible, is crucial to the rhetorical construction of linguistic neutrality. The perceived accessibility of SEAE allows for the portrayal of this privileged dialect as equalizing. John Trimbur (1990) notes that SEAE's perceived accessibility for

people of all backgrounds has been positioned as not just linguistically neutral, but “radically egalitarian” (p. 82), erasing differences that could, in other contexts, result in discrimination. Through this logic, SEAE, unlike other dialects, is acultural, making it the commonsense choice for a standard language that anyone can use. The more wide-reaching the perceived access to SEAE is, the more likely this dialect is to be thought of as not only widely accessible, but fully comprehensible and communicative. For instance, SEAE is positioned as so widely accessible that it is unlikely to interfere with communication because everyone can understand and use it, again securing its position as the preferred medium for public discourse.

In this study, the majority of the instructors (12 out of 18) positioned SEAE as basic and, relatedly, accessible through multiple contexts, including schooling, reading, home literacy practices, or even simply an “innate sense of language” (Line 607). It was not the rules that Richard expected to have to teach, but tricks for learning how to “tap into” (Line 620) students’ existing knowledge of language in order to correct their syntactical and/or usage problems “on their own” (Line 599). Similarly, Julie assumed that the students at her institution already knew grammar and usage rules. When something didn’t meet her expectations, she didn’t teach the rule; she pointed out what she believed to be a mistake. As Julie explained,

[I]f it’s just grammar stuff, I just circle it to point it out to them. At least [my] experience here is that most of the students here, they know it. It’s just a matter of proofreading. So, I just catch it for them as we go through. (Lines 347-354)

Julie caught the mistakes for her students but believed they had the necessary knowledge to transition to the standard on their own. Other instructors revealed a similar belief when they shared their strategy of having students reread certain sentences in order to catch their own mistakes. Note that assumptions about students’ prior exposure to SEAE may be specific to certain institutions as Julie later indicated that when she taught at other institutions, she approached grammar differently, offering more extended and direct lessons. Nonetheless, as the above examples demonstrate, the assumption that students have had access to SEAE before entering college influences instructors’ practice and pedagogies.

While some instructors did not say how or where their students should have gained mastery of SEAE or an “innate sense of language” (Richard, Line 607), others explicitly named economic class, prior schooling, and reading practices as factors that influence exposure and access. Melissa articulated the assumption that students have learned SEAE—especially grammar and usage—in their precollege educational experiences when she stated, “on

the sentence level, the writing is not what you would hope from a college freshman” (Lines 65-66). Similarly, Jonathon expressed his expectations for SEAE by describing his own path to standard grammar use, which does not include college writing classes. Instead, he stated,

I learned all my grammar—which still, in a 300 level class, most of my students don’t know the basic rules of grammar, which always surprises me—but I learned all my grammar in middle school, a little bit in high school and in my foreign language classes in college. (Lines 597-602)

For Jonathon, the assumption that grammar instruction happens before college was so strong that he was surprised when “most of [his] students [didn’t] know the basic rules,” even though he (as well as several of the other instructors) had learned to expect some (or most) students to struggle with this level of language use. Positioning sentence-level standardness, including SEAE, as “basic” contributes to the sense that this dialect is widely accessible.

Although many of the instructors believed that students had access to sentence-level SEAE through their prior educational experiences, some noted that certain schools or school districts were failing in this instructional area. Positioning reading as another vehicle for the standard allowed instructors to both acknowledge discrepancies in access and still demand adherence to the standard without explicitly teaching it. Darrell described his expectation that readers (a seemingly uniform category) have had access to the standard through interaction with texts when he stated,

I think as readers, we sort of absorb [a familiarity with the conventions of English language] without really thinking about it. We understand when a preposition is used wrong, and it sort of falls on the ear wrong. If you’re a reader, you pick that up, but if you’re not a reader, if you’re not familiar with conventions of English language, you know, you’re less likely to catch that. (Lines 367-372)

Sentence-level standardness here is so accessible that it should be something we can accomplish without much effort—by developing an “ear” for it. In fact, Darrell positioned both “English language” as equivalent to SEAE and the category “readers” as equivalent to being “familiar with [the] conventions of English language.” If students do not demonstrate sentence-level standardness, then, they are to blame for not being a “reader” and “pick[ing the conventions] up.” Darrell did not specify the kind of reading practices nor the texts that would help give students access to standards, likely because the standard, and by extension standard reading, is treated as normal (common sense) and unaffiliated. Another instructor, Kate, caught herself making

assumptions about what “reading” means and noted “they may be a reader but they may not be reading stuff that’s very good. Maybe everything they read is on the internet” (Lines 393-395). Nonetheless, the explicit references to reading practices and the sense that students should have an “ear” for what is correct, allowing them to catch their own mistakes when they read their writing aloud, reflects an assumption that SEAE is widely available.

Despite the sense that SEAE is widely accessible, there was consistent acknowledgement that structural inequalities influence students’ sentence-level competence. One instructor explicitly stated, “upper [SES] students tend to naturally have what’s considered acceptable standard American English grammar” (Kelly, Lines 396-397). Also, instructors regularly turned to adherence to standards as one clue about the kind of previous educational experiences students might have had, which they related to familial income level. However, when instructors believed students had multiple opportunities to learn sentence-level standardness (through schooling, reading, public and private language use, etc.), they were disappointed or annoyed when students fail to meet their expectations. Nan demonstrated the emotion attached to expectations about standards as she “detest[ed] having to teach punctuation,” but did so once a semester, “run[ning] through like major reasons to use a comma, to use a colon, to use a semicolon. And what’s a complete sentence? All that kind of junk” (interview, December 16, 2009, Lines 370-372). Nan not only hated teaching grammar and usage but also did so quickly and only once per semester, assuming that students could then go back to her handouts on their own if they needed additional instruction. It is likely that the positioning of the standard as readily available and basic contributed to Nan’s assumption that students should largely be able to teach themselves from her handouts.

The assumption that SEAE is widely accessible carries significant implications for instructors’ beliefs about and commitment to teaching sentence-level standardness and their reactions to nonstandardness. Because the instructors assumed that students should have had opportunities to learn SEAE prior to entering their classrooms, they implied that it either did not need to be taught or that it wasn’t their job as writing instructors to do the teaching. This perspective encourages an acceptance of the myth of meritocracy, which positions all success in this country as a result of individual effort—not unearned privilege—and, therefore, as fair. If everyone begins at the same starting line, standardness, like success, is both an individual accomplishment based on effort and an individual’s responsibility. This perspective effectively works to blame the victim for inequality.

## Implications

This article illustrates the central role of SLD in positioning SEAE as linguistically neutral. As an ideological discourse, SLD must be perceived as given to be persuasive. Exposing the features of SLD as discursive and rhetorical, then, challenges this discourse's givenness and, ultimately, standard language ideologies. Therefore, my hope is that identifying and challenging the features of SLD will allow writing instructors and scholars to challenge the perceived inevitability of SEAE. Specifically, I hope we will all actively work to identify and avoid features of SLD in our language, our pedagogy, and our administration. This means naming the standard, being clear about the relationship between language and meaning, making language a focal point, resisting the urge to refer to language use as clear, and not being so quick to assume that SEAE is the language variety used in students' reading materials, homes, or previous schools, or that students simply have an ear for this one language variety.

Because the act of naming has had a profound effect in other areas (Whiteness studies, gender studies, etc.), I suggest we begin there. In our practices, in writing studies scholarship, and in others' engagement with this topic, we must insist that SEAE be labeled as *standard* and recognized as a dialect—as opposed to, for instance, simply being English or language. Acknowledging SEAE as a dialect—that is, as language that is cultural and *not* linguistically neutral—challenges the perception of SEAE as natural and normal and works against multiple features of SLD. In addition to the act of naming SEAE as an expectation for a writing course (if indeed it is) and a dialect of English, instructors can also resist standard language ideologies by avoiding vocabulary associated with correctness when talking about standardness and dialects. Some scholars (e.g., Moss & Walters, 1993) have suggested replacing the language of correctness—a highly evaluative model of right and wrong—with appropriateness, introducing the importance of context to what is deemed in/appropriate. Although this approach may allow for questioning the rationale behind designations of in/appropriate, it does not require it. In fact, standard language ideologies presuppose an answer to this question by positioning the standard as superior and accessible. Additionally, appropriacy language includes evaluation—labels of appropriate or inappropriate still imply that a particular language variety is wrong for a context or occasion. As Lippi-Green (1997) says, appropriacy arguments—despite their intentions—work to reject nonstandard language varieties (p. 107). Or, stated more strongly, an appropriacy approach allows for linguistic segregation (Young, 2007) and eradication (Stanford, 2011).

I suggest, then, using the labels *conventional* and *unconventional* as a frame for describing language practices within particular contexts, which avoids an immediate valuing of the language use: conventional is not always deemed good and unconventional is not always perceived as bad. Indeed, academics and students are often very willing to challenge the conventional. It is important, here, to note the distinction between *conventions* and *conventional* as the term *conventions*, when associated with language use, can be coded language for grammar/mechanics and is often seen as good. Framing the conversation about SEAE as un/conventional language use allows instructors to acknowledge a typical and typified approach to language use in a given context but also makes clear the social and rhetorical construction of these positions as opposed to allowing them to be common sense and, potentially, perceived as neutral. Again, describing certain language practices as un/conventional does not carry with it judgment about correctness but asks for careful consideration of the benefits and risks associated with following or breaking conventions, thereby encouraging reflection on and/or discussion about why some language practices are un/conventional in particular contexts and for particular audiences, under what circumstances it may be important to stray from a typical approach, and the possible effects (both positive and negative) of choosing unconventional language use.

In addition to purposefully avoiding the features of SLD and naming SEAE, Vershawn Ashanti Young's (2007) code-meshing offers another approach to challenging SLD and the inevitability of SEAE. First, he denounces the clear distinction between SEAE (which he terms White English Vernacular) and other language varieties, specifically African American English (which he terms Black English Vernacular), destabilizing SEAE as one, clearly identifiable set of language norms. This closer look at SEAE directly challenges the SLD practice of diverting attention from language. Additionally, if code-meshing becomes the goal, the need for SEAE to be perceived as widely accessible diminishes as students' innate sense of language—whatever language that may be—is an asset in the writing classroom. Finally, code-meshing deliberately highlights the relationship between language and meaning as writers must constantly make choices among various linguistic resources at their disposal.

More than asking students to code-mesh, scholars like Stanford (2011), Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue (2011), Nettel (2011), and Canagarajah (2011) ask writing studies scholars to practice their own code-meshing, which would, in effect, create a new, diverse standard. I extend these scholars' calls for code-meshing in our field's scholarship: Whether you can perform it in your own scholarship, sanction it in your journals and publications,

or find ways to acknowledge and reward it as a reader and educator, giving voice to linguistic diversity is crucial. Moreover, even those of us who feel fairly inept when it comes to code-meshing in scholarship should be able to code-mesh in teaching materials (syllabi, prompts, etc.), allowing students to see our writing as a model of what is possible and encouraging students to incorporate all of the language varieties they bring with them to the classroom. Finally, acknowledging and rewarding students' code-meshing are necessary to challenging standard language ideologies and the perceived inevitability of SEAE.

Of all the suggestions I offer for resisting SLD, code-meshing is likely to be the most controversial outside the field of writing studies. As we've seen in the past (e.g., the Oakland Ebonics Resolution), even when educators are trying to help students master SEAE, the incorporation of other language varieties is often met with resistance, fear, and bigotry by multiple audiences. Nonetheless, as SRTOL reminds us, it is the responsibility of writing studies instructors and scholars to continue our efforts to create space for linguistic diversity and, more importantly, linguistically diverse students. As I've argued in this article, one way to create that space is by identifying and resisting SLD and challenging the inevitability of SEAE.

## **Appendix**

### *Interview Protocol for Writing Instructors*

#### *Part I*

1. How long have you taught?
2. Where else have you taught?
3. Please briefly describe the student-authors you pictured when reading these papers.

#### *Part II*

1. Pick one text and walk me through the notes you made to the paper. As you are talking, use as much detail as possible to explain what you marked and why you marked it.
2. Please also tell me how you would talk to the student who you imagine wrote this paper about what you marked.
3. From your experience, what does it look like when writing doesn't meet your expectations? How do you account for these instances?
4. In your experience, how common are these occurrences?

*Part III.\*- Questions for each of the student papers*

5. Are there particular details that are striking to you in this paper? Why?
6. In as much detail as possible, describe the student you pictured as having written this paper.

If not addressed by the response to Question 6:

7. How old do you think the student is?
8. What kind of education do you think this student had before coming here?
9. Where do you think the student grew up?
10. What political affiliation do you think the student has?
11. What race do you think this student is?
12. What socio-economic class do you think this student comes from?
13. What gender do you think the student is?

*Part IV*

1. Did you identify with anything in this paper?
2. Can you imagine writing on this topic?
3. Do you personally agree with the argument or stance in this paper?
4. Would you ever use language or phrases similar to this student?

*Part V. Reveal gender, race, and class of student author*

- A. If it matches up with the instructor's profile: Do you think this means that our writing reveals our identity? Or that our writing is connected to our identities?
- B. If it doesn't match up with the instructor's profile: Do you think in other instances you could tell a writer's identity from the text? Do you think there is a connection between writing and identity?

*Part VI*

1. How do you self identify in terms of race?
2. How do you self identify in terms of socio-economic class?
3. How do you self identify in terms of gender?

\*For each of the questions in Part III, I will ask, if necessary: What from the text and your prior teaching experiences make you think that?

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