

Dialect

IS NOT DEFICIENCY

Valuing the Variety in Language

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Dr. Elizabeth Winkler

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR ELIZABETH WINKLER DIDN'T SET OUT TO BE A LINGUIST, BUT SEVERAL UNEXPECTED EXPERIENCES, OCCURRING AT CRITICAL MOMENTS IN HER LIFE, COMPELLED HER TO CONSIDER A CAREER STUDYING LANGUAGE: ITS DEVELOPMENT, INTRICACIES, USES, AND ROLE IN BOTH SHAPING AND REFLECTING SOCIAL REALITY. SHE CALLS THESE MOMENTS "WEIRD LITTLE ACCIDENTS OF LIFE." THE FIRST WAS WHEN SHE TRAVELED — UNDER PROTEST, SHE SAYS — TO MEXICO AS AN UNDERGRADUATE TO FULFILL A LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT FOR OHIO UNIVERSITY IN ATHENS. WINKLER HAD TAKEN A YEAR OF FRENCH AND A YEAR OF SPANISH, ONLY TO FIND OUT FROM HER ADVISOR THAT THE UNIVERSITY REQUIRED TWO YEARS OF THE SAME LANGUAGE. AT THE TIME, SHE SAYS, "I DIDN'T SEE ANY REASON WHY I NEEDED A FOREIGN LANGUAGE." ONCE IN MEXICO, HOWEVER, SHE IMMERSSED HERSELF IN THE LOCAL CULTURE AND LIVED WITH A HOST FAMILY FOR FOUR MONTHS. FOR THE FIRST TIME, WINKLER SAYS, "IT BECAME VERY CLEAR TO ME THAT I WASN'T JUST A PART OF THE HUMAN COMMUNITY. I WAS AN AMERICAN, AND THAT MEANT CERTAIN THINGS."

Having originally planned to go to law school, Winkler returned to the United States and completed her BA in Political Science — a degree that contributed to her awareness of how the world functions, how social groups interact, and what governs them. But she had already been bitten by the travel bug. The second happy accident concerned the placement for her service with the Peace Corps after college: on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. She thought her background in French would help her communicate with Haitians, and was surprised when people couldn't understand her. At first, she attributed this to her "terrible French," but Winkler later learned that her French skills weren't the problem. Rather, it was that people were speaking a creole — a mixture of French and many African languages that was virtually unintelligible to her when she first arrived, but which was so fascinating to her that she became hooked.

Now Winkler is an expert on creole languages, some of which are spoken in certain areas of the United States. In Louisiana, for example, a French-based creole is spoken, and Gullah is the creole language used by African American populations on islands off the South Carolina, Georgia, and north Florida coastal regions. Creole, Winkler explains, is more a reflection of the origin of the language than a scientific definition. "Creoles have all the same properties that other languages do," she says. "The only difference is in how they were born." Creole arises when the

altogether. The Afro-Caribbeans, mostly Jamaican and speaking Jamaican Creole (English-based, but influenced by West African languages like Akan), immigrated to work on the construction of a railroad from the coast to the capital of San Jose, and then stayed to work for the United Fruit Company. The Spanish spoken by native Costa Ricans in the surrounding communities continues to be an active influence. The result is Limonese Creole, a stabilized but not static language which draws from English, Spanish, and West African dialects.

With fascinating examples like these, it is no surprise that students pay attention in Winkler's classes. Though housed in the English department (Western Kentucky University doesn't have a separate Linguistics department), Winkler's classes serve a specific population of students, including both Education majors and students in the English and Allied Arts track, some of whom are preparing to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). Though most linguists are not trained to teach ESL (or teach others to teach ESL), Winkler received Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification as part of her Masters degree in Applied Linguistics from Ohio University, Athens, and she has significant experience in that area.

But Winkler's favorite class to teach is Introduction to Linguistics, which attracts students from a variety of disciplines. She explains its appeal as stemming from the fact that "language is what we do every day. Everyone on the planet can contribute to this course." She adds that it is a particularly dynamic course, one in which she never has to "pull teeth" to get students to talk because "the students come in with lots to say." Their enthusiastic participation, their contributions about real life experiences and their observations about how they and their communities use language ensure that Winkler learns something from every class, and that students learn to appreciate their own regional diversity. "A lot of Americans don't think we're unique at all," Winkler says. "We are too used to what television tells us about ourselves. We think we have no culture, no anything, but we do. We have very distinct culture, and it's interesting."

If there is one thing she hopes students learn in her classes, it is that "dialect is not deficiency" and that

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native speakers of several different languages live in close proximity and need to communicate with each other. In most cases, the dominant language (usually that of the group in power) supplies the vast majority of the vocabulary, but the languages of the subordinate group influence the structure and grammar of the creole as well.

Naturally, the development of any specific creole language is dependent on the particular context. In a colonial location like Haiti, for example, which the French left in the early 1800s, Haitian Creole has become more and more distinct because of the absence of contact with generalized French. In Barbados and the Bahamas, on the contrary, the creole is more intelligible to English speakers because the British retained their presence and set up schools, and the languages grew closer and closer together.

And the creole spoken in the Limon province of Costa Rica, where Winkler did research for her dissertation, had a different trajectory

This dynamic interaction between different languages results in some unusual grammatical and syntactical developments. For example, sometimes Spanish words appear in Limonese Creole, but are made to conform by speakers to the rules of creole grammar. The example Winkler gives of this is the word "pasearin'," which comes from the Spanish word "pasear," or "to hang out," to which has been added the *-ing* verb ending found in English, creating a hybrid that means "hanging out." Other times, the meaning of a word in Spanish affects the usage by Creole speakers, as in the sentence "Di taym chieng op man" ("the time change up man"). In this utterance, "taym" (time), though it seems to be English, actually draws on the meanings of the Spanish word *tiempo*, which can refer either to time in the sense of "date" or to "weather." The speaker of Limonese Creole who says "Di taym chieng op man" is actually communicating that the *weather* is changing a lot.

speaking in a certain way does not make someone sound “ignorant.” Winkler’s classroom conversations with teachers and future teachers help them see that the standard language is not necessarily more beautiful or logical than local language, but that we all need to learn when and how to use each. This is especially important, she says, for future educators, sometimes overly influenced by mainstream media, who think their job is to enforce an idealized, standard English usage exclusively. As she tells her students, “Language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” In other words, the “standard” language is the version that was used by the group with the most power, whether that is economic, political, or military power. “So many kids,” Winkler laments, “get turned off to education so early on because their teachers come down on them for being local.” As a teacher of future teachers, Winkler’s influence extends to the students of her students in ever-widening circles.

One of Winkler’s ongoing research projects also has far-reaching implications. She is at work helping scholars, educators, and politicians in Liberia develop an orthography (standardized system of spelling or representation) for the Kpelle language. Winkler first encountered this unwritten language in a field methods course she took as a Ph.D. student. Though she was told by professors that publishing a Kpelle dictionary would be of “linguistic interest,” Winkler actually became interested in Kpelle mostly because of her relationship with a Kpelle-speaking refugee family that she worked with in Indiana.

It was about ten years ago that she met someone from the Liberian government (who, incidentally, knew her parents) and who later ended up becoming the Minister of Education. The Liberian government was



Dr. Winkler and friends at the International Festival in Bowling Green

interested in developing Kpelle as the co-national language of Liberia. Like many African countries with a history of colonialism, Liberia, whose official language is English, sees the institutionalization of Kpelle as a means to promote cultural pride and active identity among Liberians. “It will connect people back up to their culture,” Winkler says, adding that it will also raise literacy. “Raising literacy and producing materials in that language,” she elaborates, “will provide local people with more access to education and knowledge from elsewhere.” Winkler does acknowledge, though, that language preservation is a contentious issue among linguists. Preservation of languages, like Limonese Creole or Liberian Kpelle, is important, but, as Winkler says, “The preservation of the community is first.” She indicates that this is a big debate in linguistic circles, but added that it’s sometimes a matter of where to spend limited resources: on printing textbooks and creating dictionaries or on the more pressing material needs of the people of the community, like food or a clean water supply.

It depends a lot on the country, Winkler states, describing significant efforts in Jamaica and Hawai’i, for example, on growing and publicizing Creole through television shows, textbooks, dictionaries, poetry, literary journals and presses. Celebrating the diversity and variety in language is clearly at the heart of Winkler’s academic and teaching interests. Winkler grows even more animated when she reflects on the joys of teaching at Western Kentucky University, where she is able to help students — aware of the stigma of rural, “country” talk — develop a pride in their roots through inquiry into the way in which they use language. “I’ve had a ball working here,” she says, “because I’ve had such open students in my classes. They have been open to talking about where they come from and get excited about discussing themselves.” It’s not hard to imagine students walking out of one of Dr. Elizabeth Winkler’s classes with a deeper intellectual understanding of language, but also with a deeper appreciation of what makes them special. ■