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Brittany Brannon  
*Denison University*

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## Writing Speech: LOLcats and Standardization

*Brittany Brannon '12*

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From the time we are small, we are taught that there are only certain forms of spelling and grammar that are appropriate for written work, regardless of how closely those forms align with our speech. This distinction is not an innocent one. The inability to use standard written English has many social judgments attached to and embedded in it. This becomes especially important when we begin to look at the representation of speech differences in writing. The politics surrounding the representation of nonstandard speech have roots in the standardization of written language in England. I will begin by looking at the ways in which the philosophical and political climate surrounding written language was influenced by this movement. I will then examine the foundations of linguistic understanding in America. Next, I will review an argument on the ways that the physical presentation of a text affects its meaning. I hope to illustrate this process by examining the use of language in the creation of the LOLcats phenomenon. Finally, I will offer an opinion on how to navigate the politics of representing speech differences in writing.

In chapter eleven of his book *Inventing English*, Seth Lerer states, "What seems clear from their [the orthoepists'] work is that in the early-modern period, education and standard English came to be associated" (166). While such a statement makes strides toward laying bare the type of elitist prejudices surrounding the use of language, both in our current time and in the time of the orthoepists, it also serves to cover some of those prejudices at work. By combining the terminology of current understandings of dialect in America ("standard English") with the terminology used by the orthoepists ("education"), he elides some of the prejudices of each.

For the orthoepists, "standard English" was not, as it is today, a dialect or form of the language that was given precedence over the other forms. Instead it could more accurately be called proper English or correct English. Many of the orthoepists believed in the inherent relationship between the sounds of words and the object or concept to which the word referred (164). The idea of a one-to-one relationship of language to experience naturally led to the belief that there must be correct and incorrect forms of language. In the time of the orthoepists, this often came to be couched in terms of "purity" and "corruption" or of propriety (Lerer 159).

For most of the orthoepists, the line between correct and incorrect language was demarcated by education. Many of them believed that "The best English is that of the 'learned'" (Lerer 156). Alexander Gil, for example, stated that "writing will have to conform not to the pronunciation of plowmen, working-girls, and river-men...but to that used by learned and

refined men...in their speech and writing" (quoted in Lerer 159). What becomes apparent in Gil's statement is that for the orthoepists, education was tied to class—and, therefore, proper language was based as much on class interests as it was on the speech of the educated.

It is here that Lerer's use of the term "educated" begins to become problematic. Today, most people in our society believe that education is largely separate from class concerns. The American dream tells us that anyone who works hard enough can make something of themselves, often through education. This myth perpetuates the common lack of recognition that one's level of education still often has more to do with socioeconomic status than personal ability. The source of an individual's lack of education, therefore, is often located in that person's lack of work ethic or, more often, lack of intelligence. By continuation, a person who fails to use the language of the educated is perceived as unintelligent.

Lerer's comment on the orthoepists can then, I believe, be broken up into two parts. First, the orthoepists' insistence on standardization created, in their own time, an unbreakable connection between correct or proper language and the language of the educated elite. Second, that association has continued into our time but has evolved into an association of Standard English with personal intelligence. I am not trying to claim that the orthoepists were somehow less linguistically prejudiced than we are in the current day. I believe it is probably quite the reverse. I am, however, attempting to separate out the terminology that Lerer is using to show the ways that the linguistic philosophies and prejudices of the orthoepists have continued on into our own time.

In particular, the orthoepists' preoccupation with prescriptive language study seems to have continuing impacts on the way we perceive language. Almost all of the orthoepists took a prescriptive perspective on language, as might be easily inferred from the above paragraphs. If one believes in a correct and incorrect form of language, then it almost always follows that one will advocate for the use of the correct over the incorrect. For the orthoepists, the study of language seems to have been an attempt to find the proper or pure form of English and provide everyone—or perhaps only the learned—with rules on how to use that form. They are, rather unashamedly, prescriptive.

For those who came shortly after the orthoepists, most notably Samuel Johnson, the choice between prescription and description did not seem so clear. Lerer seems to want to suggest that Johnson was a descriptivist. Lerer suggests that after rejecting the patronage of Chesterfield, Johnson rejected as well the idea that language should be submitted to the control of a patron (172). Thus, "Johnson attempted to find the best in English usage of his day and, by recording it, to sanction and to stabilize it. But...he rejected the formation of any institution that would legislate the ways of language" (Lerer 173). This seems to me, however, to be a curiously paradoxical mixture of prescription and description. By describing the "best"



of the language, Johnson is hoping to encourage people to use it. He is describing to prescribe. Joseph Priestly, another scholar that Lerer characterizes as a descriptivist, also seems to be straddling this paradox. In Lerer's words, Priestly "sought not to prescribe patterns of speech and writing but rather to observe, record, and analyze current practice. From such analysis, he argued, one could induce patterns of acceptable behavior" (178). Again, Priestly seems to be describing in order to prescribe. The orthoepists' belief in a right and wrong language, or a right and wrong way to use language, seems to have had a strong enough cultural legacy to influence even those who seem to have quite different ideas about language.

The migration of the standardization movement into America follows an interesting evolution. During the era of standardization in England, the language of America often became the negative example, the type of speech and writing to avoid at all costs. Johnson himself considered the "American dialect... a tract of corruption" that all languages should hope to avoid, and he was not the only person to think this way (Lerer 181). The American language was, however, from the beginning, a site of American identity almost as powerful as the new American government (Jones 15). It seems to me that the American celebration of a new and distinct American language actually served two purposes. It created a site of national identity and it defended that national identity from criticism by Englishmen like Samuel Johnson. Unfortunately, this pressure in many ways concretized the linguistic prejudices it inherited from Britain. The Americans had a chance, when their own language came under attack, to move in positive and truly democratic directions. While insisting that their language was not inferior to, even though different from, the language of Britain, they had the opportunity to embrace linguistic pluralism. Instead, the conflation of the American language with American nationhood, and the impulse to defend both from British criticism, resulted in a type of linguistic conservatism that professed to embrace the country's democratic ideals.

Mark Twain, for example, suggested that "the American language could no longer be dictated by a social and linguistic elite" (Jones 14). Men like Noah Webster, meanwhile, advocated a "common language" in which all language differences blended into a homogenous middle ground (Jones 16). The advantage of these types of rhetoric was the ability of the American nation to boast of its language as evidence of its political beliefs—its dedication to a classless society and its incorporation of all different types of people. The unfortunate result of such theories, however, was the further devaluation of dialects within the national language. Jones states, "There was a particular resistance to — one might almost say conspiracy against — the very existence of dialect in America" (16). This seems to be a direct result of the conflation of American language with American identity, an association which resulted in "the American emphasis on language as the mechanism of political stability, and the American obsession with links between linguistic corruption and socio-cultural disorder" (Jones 16). Thus, in America, the

failure to use the standard dialect was seen not only as uneducated or unintelligent; it was socially destabilizing. Linguistic difference was equivalent to social degeneracy.

Importantly, the centrality of writing in the standardization movement generated a spotlight-like effect. If the above outlined prejudices against language loosen somewhat around spoken language, the relative permanence and distributable nature of written language makes it always subject to much more intense scrutiny and judgment. The intense debate over proper spelling, especially, and over proper grammatical forms to a lesser extent, placed an enormous amount of significance on written language. The proper use of written language, rather than signaling the writer's level of familiarity with it or level of education, came to demarcate all types of social classifications and valuations.

In his book *The Stuff of Language*, E.A. Levenston talks about this precise phenomenon. He suggests that as a result of standardization, "authors cannot introduce any variation into the spelling of formal, nonliterary texts anywhere in the English-speaking world" (Levenston 36). This highlights the intense pressure on writers to use proper spelling and grammar. When nonstandard spellings are introduced in "formal, nonliterary texts," they are seen as errors, and if they occur often enough, they reflect poorly on the perceived intelligence of their author. Importantly for Levenston, deviation can be introduced, to a certain degree, in informal and literary contexts. The type of value judgment applied to "formal, nonliterary texts," however, cannot but spill over into the way that nonstandard spellings are used in literary settings. The use of abbreviations, for example, is always "enough to suggest informality" and possibly vulgarity on the part of the speaker or writer (Levenston 37).

Levenston states, "the commonest use of deviation from conventional spelling is to indicate deviation from conventional pronunciation, that is, to represent dialect speech" (45). This is often accompanied by grammatical deviation and the use of idiom (Levenston 45). The politics surrounding the use of written language make this type of representation far from innocent. As Levenston suggests, written dialects often serve a comic purpose, "and some dialects... are conventionally regarded as funnier than others" (47). Other times, deviant spelling or usage is used to produce an eye dialect, or a type of speech that looks deviant but sounds true to pronunciation. While written dialects reflect pronunciation differences (which, as I've tried to suggest, bring with them the social judgments generally passed on those who use the dialect, including a comedic effect or the suggestion of ignorance), the point of eye dialect seems to be only to suggest differences in levels of education or intelligence. The use of deviant spellings and grammatical structures, "all stigmatized forms, [is] sufficient to establish the narrator [or other character] as not an educated speaker of the language" (Levenston 55). Importantly, this is also often used to signify that the character using the eye dialect is of a lower



social class (Levenston 56). It also separates the author from the character using the eye dialect; the author “manages through his spelling to convey both his own education and his judgment” of a character of lower education or social class (Levenston 56).

The use of deviant spellings to represent true dialects and eye dialects in writing perpetuates the prejudices that surround nonstandard language usage. The use of these dialects for comic effect further reinforces such prejudices. The social stigma surrounding dialect use makes the people who use dialects the appropriate objects of a joke. By mocking and degrading the language use of nonstandard speakers, the politics of the representation of language differences in writing dehumanizes the speakers of deviant language forms. LOLspeak is a fantastic example of the use of eye dialect to entrench the inferior intelligence and nonhuman status of its speakers.

The captioning of pictures in LOLspeak relies on a certain combination of humanoid and animal behavior for its unique cute-comic effect. Often, but not always, the images portray animals displaying some type of human-like behavior. The captions use a combination of eye dialect and grammatical deviation. Take the title of the website as a perfect example. “I can has cheezburger” begins with the inversion of the proper subject-verb order in the formation of a question. It then uses the incorrect form of the verb to be, “has” instead of “have.” Finally, it uses the “z” instead of the “s” in cheezburger, substituting the proper spelling for a phonetically correct but grammatically deviant one. The content of the phrase is unmistakable, but the construction of it is far from standard. This use of language, I argue, reinforces the inferiority of the animals to humans, and conversely, the superiority of the humans to animals. It confirms the lesser intelligence of the animals and highlights the fact that although they aspire to be, they are not human.

One example of this phenomenon is the following image:



The dog’s alert posture and situation in a chair at the dining table are meant to resemble human behaviors. Similarly, her avowal that she has manners—another form of human behavior, one with its own highly politicized history—is meant to further reinforce her desire to be like a human. Her use of language, however, marks the separation between her and the realm to which she is supposed to aspire. The incorrect, though phonetic, spelling of “mannerz” and the incorrect use of verb tense concretizes her unconquerable separation from inclusion in humanity.

The following image offers another interesting example:



This image and the caption that accompany it are set up to suggest that the cat has been offering advice to a human companion. The cat’s posture is similar to human posture used when listening to another person. Again, however, the cat is denied full human status. Even though the content of the caption suggests an exchange of ideas that would mark the cat as the human’s equal, the eye dialect denies that possibility. The cat’s grammar is correct, but the rampant misspelling, that again remains almost entirely phonetically correct, makes the caption very difficult to read. This difficulty enforces the distance between the subject of the image, the cat, and the viewer, thereby serving to dehumanize the cat even while granting it a sort of humanoid status.

If the above examples have not made clear the phenomenon I am discussing, the following image captures remarkably well the simultaneous desire and inability of these animals to be human:





This image captures perfectly the commentary that the LOLcats phenomenon makes on our society's understanding of the written representation of speech. I know that this may seem a little silly. After all, these are animals and not people, and this website is meant to be a lighthearted and adorable diversion. However, I truly believe that this phenomenon offers an insight into the continuing prejudices surrounding written language use. While on the one hand it can be seen to compare animals to people, on the other hand it can be seen to compare people to animals. Let me be more clear. By using eye dialects and written deviations commonly ascribed to less educated and lower class characters, LOLspeak equates the animals that are being captioned with those lower class characters, emphasizing the dehumanization of both. The use of deviant spelling and grammar to represent the speech of those who are uneducated or lower class, or who simply speak a dialect, positions those people in relation to users of standard language. Users of standard language are the standard for humanity, and users of nonstandard language are seen as both aspiring to and unable to achieve this standard, resulting in their dehumanization.

It seems, then, that we should encourage the cessation of deviant spelling to represent true dialects and eye dialects. If it is inherently dehumanizing, then there can be no benefit, only a great deal of harm, in employing it. It may not, however, be that simple. Junot Diaz, a bilingual Spanish and English author, suggests that there is value in representing linguistic difference in writing. He believes that "the concept of translation is crafted by a dominant culture; in practice *translation is erasure*" (Ch'ien 209). The failure to assert one's linguistic differences results in the disappearance of one's cultural differences as well. As a result, Diaz writes his works in intertwined Spanish and English, without the use of quotation marks or italics to demarcate the two languages. For him, "unintelligibility is an absolute bedrock component of language... There was never this myth of perfect communication" (quoted in Ch'ien 201). He holds the tensions

between the different languages, and the difficulty for speakers of each to understand the other, to be part of the artistic power of his work.

Perhaps, then, the real way to resolve the issue of representing speech differences in writing is to go the way of Junot Diaz and embrace the plurality of linguistic experience. Although he is dealing with two different national languages, I think much of what he says can also be applied to dialects within a national language. We must first, I believe, realize the fiction of the standardized form of the language for what it is—simply a dialect that has been granted social privilege. After that, we can embrace the fact that linguistic difference, while occasionally inhibiting perfect intelligibility, lends richness to our cultural experiences. Perhaps then, we will be able to find a way to represent different language uses in writing that celebrates their speakers rather than dehumanizing them.

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