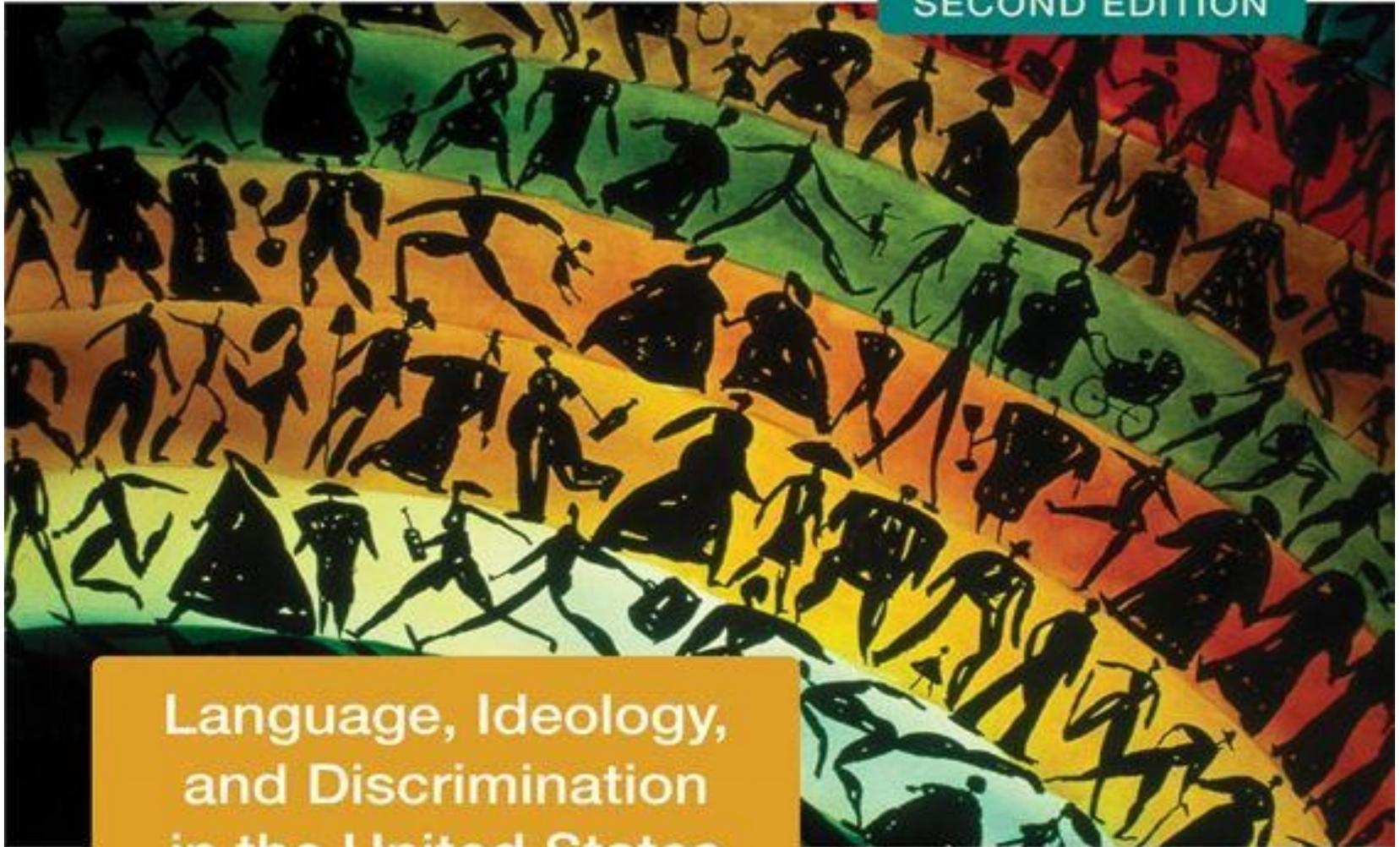


English

with an Accent



SECOND EDITION



Language, Ideology,
and Discrimination
in the United States

Rosina Lippi-Green



English with an Accent

Since its initial publication, *English with an Accent* has provoked debate and controversy within classrooms through its in-depth scrutiny of American attitudes toward language. Rosina Lippi-Green discusses the ways in which discrimination based on accent functions to support and perpetuate social structures and unequal power relations.

This second edition has been reorganized and revised to include:

- ● new dedicated chapters on Latino English and Asian American English
- ● discussion questions, further reading, and suggested classroom exercises
- ● updated examples from the classroom, the judicial system, the media, and corporate culture
- ● a discussion of the long-term implications of the Ebonics debate
- ● a brand-new companion website with an interactive bibliography, glossary of key terms, and links to audio, video, and images relevant to each chapter's content, available at: www.routledge.com/cw/lippi-green.

English with an Accent is essential reading for students with interests in attitudes and discrimination toward language.

Rosina Lippi-Green is an independent scholar and award-winning writer of fiction. She holds a PhD in linguistics from Princeton University, USA, and was a University of Michigan, Ann Arbor faculty member for ten years.

“This second edition of *English with an Accent* exceeds the high standard of research excellence that Lippi-Green first displayed in 1997. This new book introduces keen insights about language, justice, discrimination, and the human condition in America.”

John Baugh, *Margaret Bush Wilson Professor in Arts and Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis, USA*

“*English with an Accent*, a powerfully penned exposition on the relation between language, subordination, and discrimination, was already insightful and thought-provoking when it first appeared in 1997. This updated and expanded second edition has made it absolutely invaluable, and I can’t wait to use it in my classes. It represents sociolinguistics at its best – theoretically informed, but decidedly applied as well, implicating race relations, immigration, social class, education, politics, immigration, and more. It is impossible to read this book and not be troubled by prejudices and practices that we didn’t notice or consider problematic before.”

John R. Rickford, *J.E. Wallace Sterling Professor of Linguistics and the Humanities, Stanford University, USA*

“This new edition breaks new ground again, providing updates related to politics, internet usage, and the classroom . . . It will be the go-to text for explorations of language and its connection to social identity, linguistic authority, and language-based oppression. I can’t wait to use it in my courses.”

Robin Queen, *Arthur F. Thurnau Professor, University of Michigan, USA*

“*English with an Accent* is an encyclopedic, cutting-edge update of Lippi-Green’s classic text on language subordination. Hard-hitting and thought-provoking, this is an essential work.”

Jane H. Hill, *Regents’ Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics (Emerita), University of Arizona, USA*

English with an Accent

Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States

Second Edition

Rosina Lippi-Green

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Introduction

Language ideology or science fiction?

The American ideal, after all, is that everyone should be as much alike as possible.

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1984: 64)

If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion.

Noam Chomsky (<http://tinyurl.com/4q7eej4>)

This book is about language, but let's begin with a bit of science fiction. Imagine the following:

On January 1 of the next new year, each person residing in the United States wakes up to find themselves physically transformed: regardless of race or ethnicity, all adult males 18 and older will be exactly 6' tall and weigh 175 pounds; adult females, 5'9", at 140 pounds. All persons will show exactly the same physical measurements (length of tibia, diameter of wrist) and body fat ratios, with a differential arising from gender-specific roles in the propagation of the species. All persons newborn through age 17 will approach the adult model on a scale graduated exactly to age. Metabolism has adjusted so that the ratios of height to weight are maintained regardless of diet or development of musculature.

Let's take this strange idea a step further and imagine what this revolution would mean to us in our day-to-day lives. Some of the repercussions might be seen as positive:

- Tremendous behavior shifts in matters of mate selection and sexuality. Every woman will wear what is now a size ten, but as sizes are no longer relevant or meaningful, the social connotations of clothing sizes (petite or queen, extra tall, extra long, extra broad, extra narrow) will quickly be lost.
- The end of the diet industry.
- Sudden resolution of health problems related to weight. Heart disease, hypertension, anorexia – a whole range of difficult health problems greatly simplified or resolved overnight.
- Dramatic changes in the way we think about food. As metabolism is now fine-tuned to deal with excessive or insufficient calories, carbohydrate and fat intake, much of the culture and psychology about eating would evolve in new directions.
- Revolution in the design and manufacture of easy chairs, roller-skates, toothbrushes, gloves, skis, kitchen counters, bathtubs, lawnmower handles, car seats, bed sheets, violins, submarines, auditoriums, coffins and everything else which now makes allowance for variation in physical size. This would mean a tremendous economic advantage for businesses which can streamline production in ways never imagined.
- Sports, professional and otherwise, would change greatly. But because muscle tone, agility, speed, and strength would remain matters of life style, nutrition, and training, sports as we know them would not disappear, but shift in focus and nature.

These are just a few areas which would be changed. The list can easily be expanded as we anticipate the major social and cultural impact on our lives.

When I discuss this fictional United States with my classes, the students are eager to list things that would be easier, cheaper, more streamlined and efficient if this physical world were suddenly to become a reality. Slowly, different considerations begin to emerge, which students are sometimes reluctant to express. They have to do with issues which are more subtle, which touch on identity and self-awareness, aesthetic and value systems. It sounds like this would be a good thing overall, for us as a country, says one student. But my father and my grandfather and my great-grandfather were all 6'5" or bigger. With less of an apologetic tone, a Japanese-American woman tells the class "I can't imagine being that tall." Another student asks, "Who decided on these particular figures? Why 140 pounds for women – wouldn't 125 be more aesthetically pleasing?" And yet another comment: "Why shouldn't men and women be the same height?"

Before I let the class discuss these questions in any depth, there is one more step in the science fiction fantasy which we must consider.

Imagine now that this unanticipated and unwilled transformation does not take place. Instead, a junior Congresswoman rises before the House of Representatives and she presents a precise, well-written proposal for a law which dictates the physical world imagined above, in which a woman who is 6'2" or a man who weighs 225 pounds are either violating federal law willfully, or must be labeled handicapped.

In support of her proposal, the Congresswoman outlines the many social ills which will be instantaneously fixed, and the economic advantages for the manufacturing and business communities. She provides projections which promise that billions of dollars will be saved if this law is put into effect, money which can be put into education and job training. Her presentation includes complex essays and calculations by a panel of experts who have, on the basis of considerable study, determined what ideal heights and weights must be – what makes a superior, efficient, aesthetically pleasing human being.

"Let us all be one height and weight," she says. "For we are all one nation."

This is a funny idea; students laugh. What is wrong with it is so obvious as to be trivial, they tell me.

First, we cannot all be the same height and weight and physical type: variation and diversity are inescapable biological facts. Thus, this law would be unenforceable.

Second, even if this were not an impossibility, it would be wrong – an invasion of personal liberties – to require people to change their physical beings to approximate some model set up by others, in the name of perceived economic or social advance, even their own.

Third: People will find ways to differentiate themselves, to stand out, to be individuals, because that's part of human nature.

Fourth, and finally: The premise that we will be a better nation, a more unified nation, if we all look the same, is suspect.

Now what does this hypothetical world, this hypothetical Congresswoman and her proposal have to do with language, and more to the point, with language and discrimination? People will immediately claim that language cannot stand in for height and weight in this story. The argument will go that language is an ethereal, mutable thing, something we learn, something within our control. Height and weight are biological facts of the physical world, determined by genetics and nutrition in the first line, and by will and habit only secondarily. Language – which languages we speak, and how we speak them – is a matter of choice, people will argue, whereas height is not.

In the course of this book I will argue that language has more in common with height and weight than is readily apparent, and that the same reservations which are so self-evident when we talk about manipulation of our physical bodies can and must be applied to discourse about language, and the manipulation and evaluation of language. Language, a possession all human collectives have in common, is more than a tool for communication of facts between two or more persons. It is the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities. It may not be as tangible as height and weight, but the way we use language is more complex and meaningful than any single fact about our bodies.

The degree of control we have over language is limited. We can choose to be polite or obtuse, to use forms of address which will flatter or insult, to use gender-neutral language or language that is inflammatory; we can consciously use vocabulary which is easily understood, or we can purposefully mislead with language. But there are many dimensions of language which are not subject to conscious or direct control. And still, as speakers we are obsessed with the idea of authority over language: we talk a great deal about language as if it were an indispensable but often wayward and unpredictable servant, in need of our constant attention and vigilance if the job is to get done.

Crucial questions have been raised here which will occupy the rest of this study:

- ●What is the relationship between language and social identity? How do we use language to construct “self” and “other”?
- ●What is or is not mutable about language, specifically about phonetics and phonology (accent)?
- ●Do individuals have language rights which render the question of mutability irrelevant? That is, is it desirable or even possible to balance the individual’s language rights with the needs of the community? Is this an appropriate matter for majority rule, or is it an area where the tyranny of the majority is a real threat, and individual liberties must be invoked?
- ●Who claims authority to make these decisions, how do they manage to do this, and why do people let them?

All of these questions are important to this study, but the last question is perhaps the most complex and difficult one. There is a common conception that there is a good English, and following from that, bad English. Further, there is a good deal of consensus on who speaks good English, and who has authority to decide what is good. While anyone would anticipate heated debate on the height/weight legislation (who has the authority to decide what an ideal person looks like, and on what aesthetic, biological or other grounds?), it is interesting to note that there is little debate at all about who sets the standards for spoken and written language, standards which have been the focus of legislation, standards which affect our everyday lives.

Before we can set out on an exploration of these issues, however, there must be some common ground, built of established facts about language structure and function. Be prepared to give up some dearly held beliefs – things your teachers and parents and mentors told you – as you forge ahead.