



Sounds About White: Critiquing the NCA Standards for Public Speaking Competency

Adam Key 

Keywords: *Whiteness*, public speaking, basic course, critical pedagogy, critical discourse, instructional communication

Abstract: Using critical discourse analysis, I critically examined the National Communication Association’s (NCA) standards for public speaking competency to determine what type of ideal speaker the standards would produce. Highlighting NCA’s emphasis on “suitable” and “appropriate” forms of communication and the use of Standard American English, I argue that the ideal competent speaker in our classrooms sounds White. I complete the essay by reimagining the basic course using methods of Africana Study to explore ways that the standards for public speaking might be decolonized and made more inclusive to students of all backgrounds.

Introduction

The Communication discipline has, as of late, made significant progress in both the recognition and response to racial inequities and embedded systemic racism within its organizations, members, research, and pedagogical practices. Among these are the fundamental changes to how the National Communication Association (NCA) selects its Distinguished Scholars, the formation of the Communication Scholars for Transformation social media group in response to Martin Medhurst’s proposed editorial in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, and social media movements and articles including #CommunicationSoWhite and #RhetoricSoWhite. While this progress is both admirable and necessary, the changes implemented have severely neglected one crucial area. In order to elucidate this absence, I take the unusual path not to traverse the pages of disciplinary journals, but by going down to *South Park*.

Adam Key, University of Arkansas at Monticello, Monticello, AR

CONTACT: key@uamont.edu

In the “Quest for Ratings” (Parker, 2004) episode of the popular adult animation show, the main characters attempted to revise their student news television program in order to raise their viewership after the school threatened cancellation due to low ratings. In order to compete against their main opposition, a goofy program featuring young animals filmed with a wide-angle lens, they devised a means to appeal to more of the student body. The “Quest for Ratings” episode parodied the many ways news agencies promote offensive stereotypes in order to appeal to biases of their viewers. For the purposes of this essay, one exchange is most salient.

Eric Cartman, the proverbial bully of the main characters who is well-known for regularly making racist and sexist remarks, became the de facto leader of the student news program. After a meeting to discuss ideas to raise ratings, which included changing the name of the show from “Super School News” to “Sexy Action School News” and making up false stories about celebrities, Cartman privately approached the student weatherman, Token Black. As his name might suggest, Black is the only character on the show of African descent. During the conversation, the following exchange took place:

Cartman: Look, Token, I know the guys are having trouble bringing this up with you—but the thing is, Token, we really need to revamp your whole TV persona.

Black: Huh?

Cartman: You see, Token, people really enjoy seeing African Americans on the news. *Seeing* African Americans on the news, not hearing them. That’s why all African American news people learn to talk more—how should I say?—White.

Black: (awkward, wide-eyed pause)

Cartman: Token, all the great African American newspeople have learned to hide their Ebonic tribespeak with a more pure Caucasian dialect. There’s no shame in it, and I really think it will help our ratings. (Parker, 2004)

When Token is next shown on-screen, moments later as part of the newscast, he has abandoned his usual voice and uses one stereotypical of White American newscasters.

I chose this example for two reasons. First, despite a long history of employing fantastic and farcical tropes in order to critique larger societal issues in a comedic manner digestible to their audience, many might consider a *South Park* reference inappropriate for the pages of an academic journal. Second, the manner in which Token spoke at the end of the exchange is nearly identical to the demands placed on students in Public Speaking classrooms. Both reasons go to the central aim of this essay: to expose the discipline’s material investment in normalizing Whiteness through policing speech. While *South Park* critiqued the racist practice by making the demand for White speech from Black mouths blatant, in our classrooms, it is rarely this visible. With that critical spirit in mind, I seek to examine the manner in which BIPOC students are demanded to speak in college and university classrooms.

To engage with this goal, I conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Patton, 2014) on two documents produced by the NCA: “Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students” (Morreale et al., 1998) and “The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form and Manual” (Morreale et al., 2007). These texts were chosen for analysis given their and the NCA’s ability to shape curricular

standards in Public Speaking classrooms. Where previous studies have examined the racialized content of Communication textbooks (i.e., Clasen & Lee, 2006; Manning, 2020), there is a significant variety of textbook choices available. Further, the NCA's hegemonic presence within the discipline likely means that textbook authors and publishers are taking their cues from its standards. Additionally, while these are older documents, they both still bear the standard of the NCA and their lack of revision speaks to the organization's commitment to diversity.

The organization produces over half the published research in the discipline, more than the International Communication Association and all U.S. regional associations combined (Rains et al., 2020). In addition to its dominance, the NCA is also extremely White, particularly in relation to its pedagogical research. Scholarship in NCA journals is overwhelmingly produced by White scholars and from White perspectives. In Chakravartty and colleagues' (2018) groundbreaking article, they provided statistics related to the racial aspects of NCA journals. *Communication Education*, the organization's primary journal for pedagogical research, was at or near the bottom in every category. It had only 8% BIPOC first authors, the fifth lowest; 6% BIPOC editorial board members, tied with *Communication Monographs* for the second lowest; and despite having the third highest number of articles published, it tied with the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* for the lowest race-related keywords in paper descriptions at only 1%. Based on a comparison of articles and episodes, *South Park* has published more critiques of racism, both in percentage and raw numbers, than *Communication Education*.

Mukherjee (2020) argued, "In light of the sheer volume of critiques that critical race scholars have offered against the [W]hiteness of the canon, we cannot but conclude that the field remains so [W]hite because something/someone is deliberately keeping it so" (p. 4). According to Houdek (2018), Whiteness is kept the standard in the discipline through "a taken-for-granted system that protects its own interests and beneficiaries through everyday habits and routines, most of which seem benign and unintentional to those who carry them out" (p. 294). The pedagogical practices of the Public Speaking classroom maintain "the structural and ideological apparatuses of white privilege by rendering such privilege invisible" (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 2). To date, there has been no published analysis of the NCA standards for Public Speaking. Further, the reform movement has substantially missed the basic course. While there is #CommunicationSoWhite and #RhetoricSoWhite, there is not yet #SpeakingSoWhite. My analysis focuses on the hidden ways "power is used to 'other' particular students" (Patton, 2014, p. 725). Specifically, I argue that the NCA standards for competency in speech demand that all students perform White speech. In addition, I explore, through the lens of Applied Africana Studies, what an inclusive and liberatory public speaking pedagogy might look like. In doing so, I hope to both expose the discursive Whiteness underlying public speaking standards as well as provide direction for a more inclusive pedagogy.

History of the Present

While the study of speech and communication did not develop into a specific and separate field until the discipline split from English in 1917, instruction in public speaking is significantly older. Historical records indicate that as early as the colonial period, students took classes in how to give speeches (Delia, 1987). Speech courses then, however, bear little resemblance to their modern counterparts.

According to Cohen (1994), those who taught the earliest speech classes held to the belief that "students who took speech courses needed to learn how to become responsible and active citizens who understood

the power of language” (p. 135). Roberts (1996) noted that “the purpose of a college education at this point was to produce a virtuous, decent person, capable of speaking both in civic duties and in the professions (law and ministry)” (p. 301). While students were certainly instructed in the means to give a speech, the curriculum did not end there. It was not enough for students to know how to speak, but to have something substantial to speak about.

From the 18th to the 19th centuries, American speech courses began to drastically transform from a focus on the art of rhetoric to a focus on elocution. Keith (2007) explained these changes were due to factors primarily including

the rise of aestheticism, perceived decline in the speaking ability of college graduates and the elocutionist response, the growing need for political orators, the growth of a politically empowered middle class, and the disengagement of rhetoric instruction from its contexts of application. (p. 24)

Whereas the previous instruction had treated speaking as an art, elocution, influenced by the work of Francoise Delsarte (Cohen, 1994) treated it as a science.

The Delsarte System of Oratory was “a complex oratory system which embodied the characteristics of philosophy and science” (Roberts, 1996, p. 299). As speaking, under Delsarte, was viewed as a science rather than an art, the system’s adherents believed that specific actions within speeches would, akin to scientific laws, produce the same results every time they were employed. The system “provided charts, diagrams, and illustrations depicting the theory, on how to position parts of the body, the right eyebrow arch, the wrist movement, and torso movement” (Roberts, 1996, p. 299).

With the rise of elocution, gone were the days in which students were instructed as to how they might engage as members of a democratic society. In place of lessons on civic engagement, public speaking courses became a form of vocational training where students would learn the skill and trade of oratory. “A skills orientation to speech encouraged students to emphasize those skills regarded as valuable or marketable” and such classes were deemed useful only as much as they trained students for careers in the “pulpit, platform, and courtroom” (Chawla & Rodriguez, 2011, p. 82).

Richard Weaver (1948) critiqued similar pedagogical developments in composition courses in his essay, *To Write The Truth*. While composition and public speaking are certainly distinct courses, their shared history and pedagogical similarity are notable. Weaver himself used the terms “speaking” and “writing” interchangeably throughout his essay. Given the comparability, Weaver’s (1948) critiques become exceedingly relevant when critically examining the development of public speaking pedagogy. Referring to the practice as “making speech the harlot of the arts” (p. 27), Weaver (1948) noted that the goals of instruction have shifted from “speaking truthfully to speaking correctly to speaking usefully” (p. 28). It is this shift in public speaking pedagogy to the emphasis that students speak usefully that has placed public speaking within the basic required coursework at the majority of colleges and universities.

Since the late 1980s, most colleges and universities have required that all students take a basic communication course, typically public speaking. The ubiquitous presence of this course is due, in large part, to the demand of employers that new hires be able to communicate effectively (Roberts, 1996). As Weaver (1948) noted, students are being taught how to speak usefully. “This practical application of public speaking takes precedence over personal development. Therefore, students focus on organization,

structure, and developing logical substantive outlines. Students should also be poised, confident, and articulate with minimum verbal fillers” (Roberts, 1996, p. 303).

While communication scholars might claim that the discipline has evolved from elocution, these emphases speak to the contrary. Public speaking courses, as they exist in the general curriculum, are taught in very much the same spirit as the elocutionist movement. Where the rest of the courses offered within the discipline have evolved in pace with current research, the manner in which public speaking is taught remained stagnant. Leff (1992) noted that, for graduate students in rhetoric, “the curriculum bears only a generic resemblance to what I was taught as a graduate student. Yet, they still teach public speaking very much as I taught it. Why?” (p. 116). The consequence of the remnants of the elocutionist pedagogy within modern public speaking courses is that, since speech is viewed as more science than art, there appears to be only one correct method of speechmaking. The standard bearer of the “correct” way to speak is the NCA, who produced documents used almost universally in the assessment of college- and university-level public speaking courses.

Whiteness and Curriculum

Public speaking curriculum, like all forms of institutionalized learning, is entrenched with the needs of the powerful. Sir Ken Robinson, one of the premiere experts in the history of education, noted that the public education system was originally constructed both to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution and in its shape as an assembly line (Robinson & Aronica, 2016). Prior to industrialization, nearly the only people receiving education were White male elites. As such, Public Speaking curriculum was concerned with virtue. As the need for industrial workers increased and the middle class emerged, the goal shifted to useful speech as it would equip workers with the necessary communication skills. As McCann and colleagues (2020) noted, this advocacy of the usefulness of the discipline—“the oft repeated fact that ‘communication is the number one skill employers seek in employees!’”—is deeply intertwined with the discipline’s goal of promoting Whiteness (p. 246).

Ramasubramanian and Miles (2018) asked “under what conditions do commitments to diversity and multiculturalism unwittingly indicate complicity with more overt racism and ethnocentrism? Specifically, how does it indicate a form of colourblind racism?” (p. 428). Color-blind rhetoric is extremely efficient “at perpetuating the inequalities it claims not to notice, providing a discursive repertoire to decry the very mention of racial and ethnic membership as inherently racist; race-based initiatives can be opposed under the rubric of ‘equal opportunity for all’” (Rodriquez, 2006, p. 648). A professor exercising color-blind rhetoric may claim that they could not be racist since they have Black friends or reject claims that they are a member of the culture which disenfranchised Blacks because they, themselves, never owned slaves. A university administrator may oppose affirmative action on the grounds that it is racially discriminatory, going so far as to claim it violates Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream of judgment on the basis of character instead of skin color.

For Communication, Whiteness “is a structural problem (re)produced through the discipline’s received intellectual history, its concepts and epistemic assumptions, its canon, driving logics, and institutional frameworks” (Houdek, 2018, p. 294). Dutta (2020) argued that even the very nature of the discipline is inherently White. “The preoccupation of the discipline with the question of the communicative, then, is very much tied to the hegemonic interests of predominantly white academics, disciplinary associations, and organizations, defining the term ‘communicative’ within the parochial logics of whiteness” (p. 229).

Taken together, these authors demonstrate that the ways in which we think about, define, and teach what is good communication are structured by Whiteness. As past scholarship defines what is acceptable for future scholarship, Whiteness inevitably persists through the pages of our journals, our syllabi, and our gradebooks.

The controversy regarding the Distinguished Scholars, the highest award given by NCA, in 2019 is demonstrative of this issue. As a self-perpetuating board, the Scholars would select the new membership themselves. As power replicates itself, so did the older White men select other older White men to join them as Distinguished Scholars. When the NCA took over the selection process, Medhurst circulated a draft of an editorial for *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* that bemoaned the organization choosing diversity over merit, as if the two were somehow mutually exclusive.

In this vein, the reluctance of Medhurst and other Distinguished Scholars to see race as an analytic through which the closed structures of knowledge production have been used to dispossess, malign, and deny equal access to non-White, non-Western, and queer people while claiming to support diversity efforts show the continual significance of color. (Wanzer-Serrano et al., 2019, p. 504)

From the evergreen utilization of Plato and Aristotle to the veneration of White male “distinguished” scholars, the discipline remains inevitably intertwined with Whiteness.

NCA Standards of “Correct” Speech

The NCA is both the oldest and largest academic organization for the discipline of Communication. Founded over a century ago, it counts in its membership all major American universities that produce Communication research and the authors of the most widely used public speaking textbooks. As the primary organization for the discipline, it wields considerable sway as to how the public speaking course is taught. As such, a CDA analyzing the NCA’s standards for public speaking will reveal the most common trends in postsecondary public speaking pedagogy.

The NCA website has a page containing resources for assessment of the basic course, NCA’s term for public speaking. The site explained that assessment “is a practice in which all programs should engage” which “provides evidence that is useful when advocating for the resources that are needed to sustain a high-quality course” (National Communication Association, 2017). To guide members on how to properly assess student speech, two primary documents are listed. The first is “Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students” (SLC) (Morreale et al., 1998). While it was first published almost 2 decades ago, it is still presently listed as a resource for current use in assessment. The second document, “The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form and Manual” (CSS) (Morreale et al., 2007), published 9 years after the first, is the most recent addition. A full analysis of the collective 75 pages of each assessment document, many of which involve topics with a tertiary relation to speaking like research skills, are beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, I focus on several particular policies relevant to the manner in which students are required to speak in order to meet NCA’s standards.

The preface to the section of SLC labeled “Speaking Competencies” reads “In order to be a COMPETENT SPEAKER, a person must be able to compose a message and provide ideas and information suitable to the topic, purpose, and audience” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 7, emphasis original). Suitability and the companion term appropriateness were exceedingly common within both the SLC and CSS. Variations of

these terms appear collectively 39 times in SLC and 82 times in CSS. While, as I will discuss later, CSS has rather vague standards for appropriateness and suitability, SLC makes them significantly more explicit. While SLC includes the line that students “Select words that avoid sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 7), its own standards, under critical analysis, seem to violate this rule. For instance, under the section entitled “Articulate Clearly,” students are required to “Demonstrate knowledge of the sounds of the American English language” and “Use the sounds of the American English language” (Morreale et al., 1998, pp. 8–9). In the next section, entitled “Employ Language Appropriate To The Designated Audience,” students are cautioned that “slang, idiomatic language, and regionalisms may facilitate understanding when communicating with others who share meanings for those terms, but can hinder understanding in those situations where meanings are not shared” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9). Instead, students are demanded to “Use standard pronunciation” and “Use standard grammar” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9).

The text of CSS seems far more concerned, on its face, with avoiding bias than SLC. The term bias, in connection with the manner in which CSS avoids it, is mentioned 15 times. The authors of CSS promote it as being “developed with great concern for its psychometric reliability and validity and for biases of any kind and is determined to be a reliable, valid, and useful instrument with which to judge speeches” (Morreale et al., 2007, p. 8). Under the section describing the significant characteristics of CSS, the last characteristic, “Is free of cultural bias,” states:

Each competency is assessed with respect to the target audience and occasion. In other words, judgments are based upon the degree to which the behavior is appropriate to the “audience and occasion.” As long as the evaluator/assessor bases judgments on these criteria, cultural bias should not become a factor. (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9)

The seventh competency listed within CSS, however, seems to fall short of this proclamation. Competency Seven, labeled “Uses pronunciation, grammar, and articulation appropriate to the audience and occasion,” like the other competencies, gives standards and examples for Excellent, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory ratings. In order to earn an Excellent rating, “the speaker exhibits exceptional fluency, properly formed sounds which enhance the message, and no pronunciation or grammatical errors” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 15). Conversely, a student earning an Unsatisfactory rating has “frequent errors in pronunciation and grammar make it difficult for the audience to understand the message” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 15).

As an offer of proof of its lack of cultural bias, CSS mentions the results of two uncited studies. In the first, a group of 12 presumably White instructors and 28 “minority students” were found to have similar ratings of 12 student speeches. In the second, a statistical analysis of the evaluation of classroom speeches found no significant racial difference in grading. Neither of these results, however, effectively establishes a lack of cultural or racial bias in the implementation of the instrument. Much like Token Black from this essay’s opening example, it is just as likely that students scored similarly because they similarly adopted the standards for speaking competency in both grading and performing speeches, not because the standards are open to their cultural forms of speech.

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA, according to van Dijk (2003), “is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). It is not a method, per se, but a methodological

approach concerned with understanding how certain discourses circulate to (re)produce hierarchies of power within a given society. In the case of SLC and CSS, they mutually endeavor to discursively produce “The Competent Speaker” (Morreale et al., 2007, p. 27). The critical question, then, is what “The Competent Speaker” produced by this discourse looks and sounds like. In the current analysis, two primary discourses emerged: the emphasis on Standard American English and the demand for appropriate and suitable forms of communication.

“Standard” American English

Though neither SLC nor CCS use the specific term, “Standard American English,” the context of various rules, especially within SLC, indicates that it is what the authors were referring to. For instance, when students are told to “Use the sounds of the American English language” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 8) and use “standard pronunciation” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9), the similarity of the two rules infers a reference to Standard American English. While some might fallaciously argue that these statements cannot be combined, the entire purpose of any critical analysis is to expose hidden structures. In the same logic that we do not require a speaker to state “I am a racist” to properly label their words as racist speech, neither do SLC and CSS have to use the phrase “Standard American English” to demand and enforce its standards. The problem with these standards, however, is that there is nothing standard about how Americans use English.

The concept traces its roots to Mencken’s (1921) *The American Language*, the first text to explicitly attempt to identify and dictate the standards of American language. According to Kramer (2014), Mencken’s goal was to develop “a vocabulary drawn from American experience, a standard pronunciation that reflected American speech, a grammar grounded in common American usage” (p. 19). This development occurred in response to the political tensions of World War I, where leaders tried to invoke national unity by standardizing language use within the United States (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). The existence of Standard American English as both a fictitious language and as allegedly superior to all other variations is an effect of standard language ideology. Milroy (2000) explained that such ideologies are “supportive of a form of a language ‘imagined’ as ‘standard,’ and adversely critical of the speech of disfavored social groups” (p. 63).

Schooling at the K–12 and postsecondary levels are the primary societal mechanism for enforcing standard language ideology. Wortham (2008) argued that “educational institutions play central roles in authorizing and circulating ideologies of language through which ‘educated’ and ‘uneducated’ language use are associated with differentially valued types of people” (p. 39). This differentiation of value based on language, which Lippi-Green (2012) described as language subordination, is particularly harmful to students of color.

Language is deeply tied to one’s culture. For instance, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) “is a strong marker of racial identity and social experience for many African Americans” (Godley & Loretto, 2013, p. 317). Subordinating the language of individuals who use AAVE or other dialects, then, becomes a proxy for racism. Salazar (2013) explained the functioning of this racist system where:

students of color have been compelled for generations to divest themselves of their linguistic, cultural, and familial resources to succeed in U.S. public schools . . . When students of color experience academic difficulties, their struggles are often attributed to their culture, language, and home environment. (pp. 121–122)

Black students are aware of the White view that their language is deficient. Godley and Escher (2012) found that Black students in American schools tended to avoid use of AAVE because they feared being labeled ignorant or that their White peers and faculty would not understand them.

This subordination is, of course, not limited to schools. Senator Harry Reid, for instance, famously claimed that the key to President Obama's success was due to Obama having "no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one" (Zeleny, 2010). This racist statement is reflective of America's historical treatment of Black men and women and their language. Nott and Gliddon (1854) claimed that "unlike the 'complex languages' spoken by Caucasians, [Black people] spoke primitive languages reflecting simplistic mentality" (p. 27). This sentiment is similar to the statement Hegel made about Africa lacking a history (Kuykendall, 1993). The NCA's demand for Standard American English, then, is likewise an extension of this same dangerous ideology.

"Suitable" and "Appropriate"

The argument might be made that the NCA is no longer enforcing standard language ideology since it updated the standards of SLC to the standards of CCS. This might carry weight if the NCA were not still displaying SLC on its website. Even if it was not, however, the continued rhetoric of suitable—"compose a message and provide ideas and information suitable to the topic, purpose, and audience" (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 7)—and appropriate—"Employ Language Appropriate To The Designated Audience" (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9)—speech is equally problematic. My analysis of CCS reveals that, paired with the statements about the lack of cultural bias, it exists as an example of color-blind racist rhetoric.

In academic spaces, what is appropriate is dictated by the same norms that govern Standard American English. We speak what Martinez (2013) calls *academese*. Martinez (2013) wrote about time spent as a student confronting the oppressive nature of our academic tongue, writing:

They came back to me as quickly as I tried to forget them. The memories. The memories of pain and silence. The memories of feeling displaced and homeless. The memories of sitting in a classroom discussing critical theories about racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, gentrification, and so forth, plaguing social justice and equality—and not saying anything. The memories of feeling outside looking in: sitting in a classroom and observing people talking about you—your people—and not saying anything. Not because you have nothing to say, but rather because you don't speak the language. The language of the ivory tower that somehow speaks like it understands "your problem" and yet has never truly lived in your place. Language evoked by peers who "know" what they are talking about. Bullshit. (p. 379)

Dictating that certain speech is inappropriate for a classroom setting, but other speech is appropriate, is not necessarily a problem. When the standards for appropriateness fall along racial lines, then appropriateness and suitability become code for color-blind racist policies. The effect of such policies is telling Black students that their home cultures are inappropriate within a professional setting like a classroom, that they must be more like their White colleagues to succeed. Defenders of these policies, like Kutz (1998), argued "What we are really asking students to do as they enter the university is not to replace one way of speaking or writing with another, but to add yet another style to their existing repertoire" (p. 85). White students, however, are never asked to add AAVE to their "existing repertoire," thereby cementing the hierarchy that White language is superior to Black language.

As Nance (1989) noted, these hegemonic practices of conformity tend to punish minoritized students the most. Rather than a degree being evidence of “their intelligence, desire to learn or will to succeed,” it instead is a marker of “their ability to successfully master the college/university ‘way’ of being” (Nance, 1989, p. 14). Bartholomae (1985) explained that in order to be academically successful, “students must learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (p. 134). Rhetorically, this punishes a student for his or her cultural diversity, while insisting the hegemonic standard is normal or professional (Rodriguez & Chawla, 2010). “When teachers condescendingly explain to students that a particular ethnic style of communication is inherently ok but can only be used outside of the classroom, then the real lesson for the day is intolerance” (Nance, 1989, p. 23). As students from minoritized backgrounds often have patterns of speech and thought that diverge from the academic hegemony, they simultaneously have their own culture devalued and struggle more to complete their courses.

Reimagining the “Competent” Speaker

Both texts produced by the NCA as guidance for public speaking, when viewed through the lens of CDA, are problematic. Though both the SLC and CSS promote, on their face, a nondiscriminatory and unbiased stance, the inevitable “Competent Speaker” produced by their discourses is the White speaker. The seemingly neutral stance taken by the NCA standards for competency reifies Whiteness as normal, acceptable, and achievable.

Minoritized students, then, are at a distinct disadvantage in public speaking classes in comparison to their White colleagues. This is particularly true for Black students. Despite the progress American society has made and NCA’s overall stance against discrimination, organizations and teachers can unknowingly further racist practices. Undoing these structures and providing for a more inclusive pedagogy, then, requires a reimagining of the public speaking course entirely.

Proponents of the type of pedagogy demanded by SLC and CCS promote this practice by purporting to provide a degree of objectivity when assessing student work. However, as Shor and Freire (1987) noted, it is fundamentally impossible for an educator to be truly neutral. Expressing neutrality or objectivity, then, is itself a political statement. It is true, however, that most public speaking instructors do not meaningfully intend to oppress their students. Freire (1970) observed “innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize” (p. 48). Upon the knowledge that education is political and that current practices dehumanize students, Shor and Freire (1987) explained that an educator must then ask himself or herself a series of inquiries including “in favor of whom am I being a teacher? By asking in favor of whom am I educating, the teacher must also ask against whom am I educating” (p. 46).

In considering these questions, we can find inspiration by reconceptualizing public speaking pedagogy away from the White European lens to a different continent entirely. Tillotson and McDougal (2013) are the first authors to articulate the field of Applied Africana Studies. Tillotson and McDougal provided general principles for their method rather than explicit prescriptions on how to carry it out. The fundamental assumption of Applied Africana Studies that the “needs and interests of people of African descent cannot be understood or appropriately addressed without a clear assessment of the forces of domination, oppression, or prevention that operate against the interests of people of African descent” (Tillotson & McDougal, 2013, p. 106). Further, work “should be geared toward solving problems or meeting challenges that are relevant to people of African descent” (Tillotson & McDougal, 2013, p. 105).

In terms of method, Tillotson and McDougal (2013) stated that “[p]urely speculative scholarship alone cannot fulfill the mission of Applied Africana Studies” and that “Applied Africana Studies transcends the Western traditional dichotomy that exists between basic and applied research” (p. 106). Finally, Tillotson and McDougal (2013) argued that “Applied Africana Studies is focused on producing real-world, race-specific research solutions that can be translated to African people in a digestible form” (p. 106). Supporting this, they wrote that “research must be translatable to the everyday lives of African people while simultaneously removing the mystery and mistrust that has historically alienated African Americans from the research process” (p. 109).

The question then becomes what a liberated classroom might look like under the Applied African Studies paradigm. Nance (1989), in an essay examining the incorporation of ethnic minority students into public speaking courses, provided an example of such a classroom. While Nance’s model is certainly liberated, it is important to note that it is only one such shape a liberated classroom could take. Applying Nance’s writing as a prescriptive model engages in the same problems present within the current NCA model.

Nance (1989) described a classroom that “begins with statements of expectations by each student and the teacher” (p. 8). After these initial statements, all parties involved engage in a productive dialogue as to how the course can be adapted to adhere to a unified set of expectations within the confines of university policies. During the skills portion of the course, the instructor presents not only the theoretical basis for said skills, but “will acknowledge the cultural origins of the communication theories, place them into a social and political context and suggest that other understandings of communication exist that are also legitimate” (Nance, 1989, p. 11). Following the skills portion of the class, students will individually and collaboratively choose issues salient to themselves on which to base their speeches.

In terms of assessment, instructors will abdicate the philosophy that “[g]ood speeches are those that follow the rules as we taught them” (Nance, 1989, p. 5). Instead, the primary evaluation standard, as with art, “is that the speech worked . . . that it accomplished its goal” (Nance, 1989, p. 5). The solution is not Fanon’s (1967) notion of replacing colonial languages with native tongues. Replacing one standard language ideology is like a slave being sold from an oppressive master to a more benevolent one. Instead, liberation within the language used in the classroom requires no masters, but a respect for the autonomy and tongue of each individual. In taking each of these steps in like with Applied Africana Studies, the public speaking classroom can become a place of liberation, rather than oppression.

Conclusion

In summary, a critical discourse analysis of the NCA standards for public speaking competency revealed some rather disturbing hidden trends. Through a dual emphasis on Standard American English and appropriateness, the competent NCA speaker is one that sounds, if not looks, like the White ideal. Much like Token Black, minority students are forced to either adopt a White voice or risk a poor grade in the class.

I write this essay not to condemn the NCA, nor any public speaking instructor. Instead, I hope this analysis will cause an impetus for the reconsideration of the effects of our public speaking pedagogy. As referenced previously, public speaking has a long history, but is long overdue for revision. In particular, it is long past time for my colleagues and I to stop enforcing White hegemonic standards in how we demand our students speak.

The liberated public speaking classroom is an improbable, yet still possible, outcome. Future research might consider or even test new models for their effectiveness in increasing inclusion and alleviating the demand of White speech. It will be a long and arduous process, but it is certainly a journey worth taking. If successful, it is my hope that one day students will look back at our current classes as misguided past, rather than an oppressive present.

References

- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write: Studies in writer's block and other composing-process problems* (pp. 134–165). Guilford.
- Chakravartty, P., Kuo, R., Grubbs, V., & McIlwain, C. (2018). #CommunicationSoWhite. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 254–266. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy003>
- Chawla, D., & Rodriguez, A. (2011). Postcoloniality and the speaking body: Revisioning the English oral competency curriculum. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 11(1), 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1532708610386923>
- Clasen, P. R., & Lee, R. (2006). Teaching in a sanitized world: An exploration of the suburban scene in public communication pedagogy. *Communication Education*, 55(4), 438–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520600917616>
- Cohen, H. (1994). *The history of speech communication: The emergence of a discipline, 1914–1945*. Speech Communication Association.
- Delia, J. (1987). Communication research: A history. In C. Berger & S. Chaffee (Eds.), *Handbook of communication science*. Sage.
- Dutta, M. J. (2020). Whiteness, internationalization, and erasure: Decolonizing futures from the Global South. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 228–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770825>
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. Grove Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Godley, A., & Escher, A. (2012). Bidialectal African American adolescents' beliefs about spoken language expectations in English classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(8), 704–713. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.00085>
- Godley, A., & Loretto, A. (2013). Fostering counter-narratives of race, language, and identity in an urban English classroom. *Linguistics and Education*, 24(3), 316–327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2013.03.006>
- Houdek, M. (2018). The imperative of race for rhetorical studies: Toward divesting from disciplinary and institutionalized Whiteness. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15(4), 292–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2018.1534253>
- Keith, W. (2007). *Democracy as discussion: Civic education and the American forum movement* (Lexington Studies in Political Communication). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kramer, M. P. (2014). *Imagining language in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War*. Princeton University Press.
- Kutz, E. (1998). Between students' language and academic discourse: Interlanguage as middle ground. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds.), *Negotiating academic literacies: Teaching and learning across cultures*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kuykendall, R. (1993). Hegel and Africa: An evaluation of the treatment of Africa in the philosophy of history. *Journal of Black Studies*, 23(4), 571–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002193479302300409>
- Leff, M. (1992). Teaching public speaking as composition. *Basic Communication Course Annual*,

- 4(1), 12.
- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). The standard language myth. *Voice and Speech Review*, 1(1), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268263.2000.10761384>
- Manning, J. (2020). Examining whiteness in interpersonal communication textbooks. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 13(2), 254–258. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaa010>
- Martinez, S. (2013). Tongue tied: Resisting “Academese.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 13(5), 379–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1532708613496381>
- McCann, B. J., Mack, A. N., & Self, R. (2020). Communication’s quest for Whiteness: The racial politics of disciplinary legitimacy. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 243–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770822>
- Mencken, H. L. (1921). *The American language: An inquiry into the development of English in the United States*. Alfred & Knopf.
- Milroy, L. (2000). Britain and the United States: Two nations divided by the same language (and different language ideologies). *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 10(1), 56–89. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2000.10.1.56>
- Morreale, S., Moore, M., Surges-Tatum, D., & Webster, L. (Eds.). (2007). *The competent speaker speech evaluation form and manual*. National Communication Association.
- Morreale, S., Rubin, R. A., & Jones, E. (Eds.). (1998). *Speaking and listening competencies for college students*. National Communication Association.
- Mukherjee, R. (2020). Of experts and tokens: Mapping a critical race archaeology of communication. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 13(2), 152–167. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaa009>
- Nance, T. A. (1989). *More than just style and delivery: Recasting public speaking courses for African American students*. Speech Communication Association.
- National Communication Association. (2017). *Basic course & general education*. <https://www.natcom.org/academic-professional-resources/teaching-and-learning/basic-course-general-education>
- Nott, J. C., & Gliddon, G. R. (1854). *Types of mankind*. Lippincott.
- Parker, T. (2004). *Quest for ratings*. F. Agnone; Comedy Central.
- Patton, L. D. (2014). Preserving respectability or blatant disrespect? A critical discourse analysis of the Morehouse Appropriate Attire Policy and implications for intersectional approaches to examining campus policies. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(6), 724–746. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.901576>
- Rains, S. A., Keating, D. M., Banas, J. A., Richards, A., & Palomares, N. A. (2020). The state and evolution of communication research. *Computational Communication Research*, 2(2), 203–234.
- Ramasubramanian, S., & Miles, C. (2018). White nationalist rhetoric, neoliberal multiculturalism and colour blind racism: Decolonial critique of Richard Spencer’s campus visit. *Javnost-The Public*, 25(4), 426–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463352>
- Roberts, P. (1996). Structure, direction and rigour in liberating education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 22(3), 295–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498960220304>
- Robinson, K., & Aronica, L. (2016). *Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that’s transforming education*. Penguin Books.
- Rodriguez, A., & Chawla, D. (2010). *Intercultural communication: An ecological approach*. Kendall Hunt.
- Rodriquez, J. (2006). Color-blind ideology and the cultural appropriation of hip-hop. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(6), 645–668. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0891241606286997>
- Salazar, M. (2013). A humanizing pedagogy: Reinventing the principles and practice of

- education as a journey toward liberation. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 121–148. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0091732X12464032>
- Shor, I., & Freire, P. (1987). *A pedagogy for liberation: Dialogues on transforming education*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Tillotson, M., & McDougal, S. (2013). Applied Africana studies. *Journal of Black Studies*, 44(1), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021934712467351>
- van Dijk, T. A. (2003). Introduction: What is critical discourse analysis? In D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371). Blackwell.
- Wanzer-Serrano, D., Sowards, S. K., Pham, V. N., Asante, G. A., & Na'puti, T. R. (2019). Rhetoric's "Distinguished" pitfalls: A plática. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 105(4), 502–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1669901>
- Weaver, R. (1948). To write the truth. *College English*, 10(1), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/372066>
- Wiley, T. G., & Lukes, M. (1996). English-only and standard English ideologies in the US. *Tesol Quarterly*, 30(3), 511–535. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587696>
- Wortham, S. (2008). Linguistic anthropology of education. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 37, 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.36.081406.094401>
- Zeleny, J. (2010). Reid apologizes for remarks on Obama's color and 'dialect'. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/10/us/politics/10reidweb.html>
-