Scholars of language have long decried the general tendency to negatively judge other people about the way the world is, the way it should be, and the way it has to be with respect to language” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006:9)—of students at a public, regional university with a liberal arts education mission.

We are especially interested in beliefs about language that relate to larger social issues, in particular, bias and discrimination toward those who do not speak “standard” or “proper” English.

Introduction & Background

• Scholars of language have long decried the general tendency to negatively judge other people, institutions, and society, as a whole, based on linguistic differences (e.g., Bauer & Trudgill 1998; Labov 1966; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 2006).
• The dominant language ideology in the U.S. ignores decades of systematic inquiry into the history of the English language, regional and social dialects of English, informal and formal styles of English, and differences between spoken and written language (e.g., Bauer & Trudgill 1998; Finegan 1980).
• We question whether the dominant language ideology most often described by sociolinguists (but little studied [e.g., Niedzielski & Preston 2003]) remains prevalent at institutions with a focus on liberal arts education since, at least at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, such an education highly values “diversity and inclusiveness” and strives to cultivate “knowledge of human culture,” “critical thinking,” individual and social responsibility,” and “respect for diversity among people” ("Strategic Plan" & "Learning Goals").
• The dominant language ideology described above with its lack of critical examination and reflection with respect to the beliefs about language differences and its lack of historical consciousness is directly at odds with UWEC’s core values and culture of liberal arts education.

Methodology

• 25 undergraduate students at UWEC completed the questionnaire; 1 respondent’s data were thrown out because the respondent did not complete the consent question (N=24).
• The questionnaire was on WebSurvey and was open only to those with UWEC login: 1 consent question, 26 experimental items, 6 demographic items.
• The 26 experimental items required respondents to rate claims, judgments, or statements about different forms of English on a forced-choice 5-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (5) – Agree (4) – Neutral (3) – Disagree (2) – Strongly Disagree (1)

Attitudes toward Dialects and Accents

• We are encouraged to see that the majority of respondents acknowledge that they speak a dialect; 54% (23) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I speak a dialect of English.”
• Understanding that dialects of English are rule-governed, legitimate forms of English is still lacking to some degree, as evidenced by the ratings of the remaining three statements; see Figure 1.
• While the average response to “Some dialects do not have rules” is “disagree,” 21% (5) of respondents strongly agree, agree, or are neutral, in effect supporting the myth; see Fig. 1.
• Moreover, 54% (13) strongly agree, agree, or are neutral on the myth that “some dialects are sloppy forms of English,” see Fig. 1.
• Moreover, although nearly all respondents believe they—and presumably everyone—speaks a dialect of English, they continue to believe that some speakers don’t have an accent (even though accents are the pronunciation element of dialects); 37.5% (9) of respondents strongly agree, agree, or are neutral on the myth, “Some people don’t have an accent when speaking English”; see Fig. 1.

Selected References