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Gilman, Holly

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Are We Whom We Claim to Be? A Case Study of Language Policy in Community College Writing Placement Practices

by Holly Gilman, University of Washington

This article undertakes a qualitative case study and critical examination of the language ideologies implicit in placement procedures at an urban community college in Washington State. By focusing on the racism inherent in the tacit language policy embedded in the school's placement and assessment procedures, the author proposes strategies to effect change, both at this specific institution and others that employ similar tacit language policies.

As is common practice in higher education, Washington State's King County College (KCC) (a pseudonym), where I have taught developmental and college-level literacy for the past 15 years, has a mission statement designed to guide the college. The statement has a bullet list of 12 items, and eleventh on the list is the "responsibility" to, "Affirm the value of diversity and promote cultural sensitivity." Such declarations are now fairly common stuff. Given the history of marginalization of diverse populations in the U.S., these statements represent an important ethos to keep explicitly central as part of the mission for all community colleges. In fact, a survey of Washington State's 34 community and technical colleges' mission statements shows that 25 make explicit reference to a core theme of valuing diversity, and of the remaining nine, eight strongly imply the same by mention of "inclusion" as a core theme. Considering that the national community college population is much more diverse in terms of ethnic demographics than that of competitive entrance four-year universities—48% persons of color population vs 35% (Shapiro et al., 2017)— affirming the value of diversity and promoting cultural sensitivity seems like an obvious guiding principle. In fact, KCC has done a lot over the years to foster social equity in education, including establishing a very active Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion that sponsors many campus events designed to enhance institutional awareness of "critical social justice understanding."

However, while the institutional mission statement now explicitly aims to support diversity, some of the institutional practices remain largely unchanged and thus do not fully serve the purpose of increasing such awareness. One aspect of KCC that misses the objective of honoring diversity is that of writing placement practices. Recent scholarship has focused on many of the negative aspects of placing an inordinate number of community college students into developmental education (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014); in an effort to add to the discussion and by using KCC as an example, I argue that many of the community college placement practices are also evidence of something that rarely gets mentioned: they are tacit language policies that perpetuate the marginalized status of students who use English in ways that vary significantly from what is commonly considered correctness by those who establish placement requirements. Disentangling practice from the ideologies that reside in tacit policies is nearly impossible, for both feed and feed off each other; however, I attempt to nonetheless clarify the relationship in order to press for the need in open admissions colleges to establish explicit language policies that reflect a link between "honoring diversity," and the languages used on their campuses.

KCC's Students

Although 24% of KCC's students did not report ethnic backgrounds, 58% identified themselves as persons of color, and 41% identified their home languages as something besides English, with approximately 40 different home languages spoken. These statistics indicate that many of KCC's students are what Kanno & Harklau (2012) referred to as Language Minority (LM) students. Kanno & Harklau (2012) reasoned that LM students are not the same as English Learners (ELs) in that LM describes students whose home languages may include languages and/or language varieties other than what is often commonly called "Standard English," but English might in fact be the main language used by the student. EL, on the other hand, designates someone who is still actively engaged in learning English as an additional language in order to develop basic communicative ability in the broader culture. Of course, this distinction is not as binary as it sounds; there is a spectrum of English language knowledge for all speakers of English and especially for students in whose homes other languages are used more than English. For the purposes of my argument, I use LM to refer to students who, whatever other languages they may use, have a history of using English with enough proficiency to communicate effectively within predominantly English-language contexts. In any case, because of the spectrum of Englishes used by incoming students, LM and EL status is based in part on the subjective perception of the institution. Part of that perception is based on a lack of understanding of LM capabilities, and that lack of understanding leads to practices that keep LM students out of college-level courses.

Some of the data collected by KCC suggest the ramifications of how LM students are affected: The school has self-reported that the transfer rate for its students is 14%—the lowest in the state—and less than half of the students of color remain enrolled for a full academic year. When these low numbers are considered with the data on students' home languages and demographics, the implications are troubling. In fact, recent scholarship has shown that LM students are disproportionately affected by existing placement practices that privilege a narrow construct of English-language proficiency. Chen and Simone (2016) have shown that a higher proportion of LM students are placed into developmental education classes regardless of their preceding academic achievements. In addition, Perez, Vasquez, and Buriel (2016) pointed out that multilingual students "have learned to navigate social life in the United States through an impressive display of language learning that is not often recognized by the school system" (p.

261). While Perez et al.'s (2016) work focused on students in K-12, Bunch and Endris (2012) made a similar point about LM students who enter the community college system: "LM students may also encounter perceptions of their English language abilities and academic potential that reproduce the inequities they faced in their primary and secondary schooling" (p. 167). Bunch and Endris (2012) also pinpointed community college placement practices as one place where the inequities are moved forward. Considered together, these texts argue that LM students' school experiences, which begin in K-12, follow them into college, and a cornerstone of those experiences is an institutional lack of recognition of LM students' academic capabilities.

Placement Practices and "Standard English"

While assessment testing has an array of purposes, my primary concern is its use in placement practices that determine the first steps students take in their academic careers because, as noted above, LM students are more likely to be placed in pre-college level classes based on (mis)perceptions of their abilities to navigate academically due to linguistic variations. This point may raise the objection that there are students who, in fact, do have a need for more fundamental literacy education and support. Therefore, to clarify: I am not suggesting that any and all students at open admissions schools should be enrolled in college-level writing classes. Certainly at KCC, many students both need and benefit from additional, educational support in order to be better prepared for college-level writing challenges. My point, however, is that the focus on who needs that support is often determined by a perceived linguistic deficit rather than actual academic and linguistic ability.

One example that demonstrates this point is from KCC's recent history. The College submitted a proposal that won KCC a federal Title III Grant in 2010. The purpose of such grants is specifically to improve the success of underserved populations in higher education. In that proposal, KCC's plan to increase its low 14% transfer rate included the strategies to "review/revise placement and diagnostic testing practices [and] infuse pedagogy and curriculum materials for Generation 1.5 students [a term often used as a synonym for LM]." While the objective to review placement was a worthy one, the document went on to explain, that "Generation 1.5 students often appear in conversation to be native English speakers. However, they are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing, [and they] lack fully developed oral, written or both systems of a first language." This cursory application of scholarship on Generation 1.5 students is troubling; it left unexamined the institution's ideology that defined a main segment of the student population in demeaning terms of deficit, and that ideology frankly made little sense: How could we claim that students lack "fully developed" language? Such a notion belies the real point: Those "Generation 1.5" students didn't lack fully developed language. What they "lacked" was a version of English that matched the idealized version that the proposal writers had in mind: "Standard English." Thus, the "review of placement" was neatly sidestepped by turning the focus on getting Gen 1.5/LM students up to linguistic speed by "infusing" curriculum with lessons aimed at correction in their language ability.

This point is pertinent to understanding something fundamental about how belief in a fixed and somehow superior language asserts judgment about those students who don't seem to use that language well enough. Coupland (2000) pointed out, "To link education to SE [standard English] risks confirming the belief that 'standardness' is a correlate of 'excellence'" (p. 628). Yet this is exactly what KCC's Title III grant proposal did: By denoting LM/Gen 1.5 students as linguistically deficient, it determined that the perceived lack of "standardness" and "excellence" in language use was the single-most determining factor in assessing those students' academic (in)abilities. The consequence of this point is that, while placement was cursorily reviewed as part of grant activity, there was no real revision to placement practices within the five-year span of the grant's implementation. At the time, a few English faculty members and even the Dean of Academic Programs expressed interest in exploring new ways to assess and place students, but ultimately there was not enough support across the campus, and efforts at large-scale placement reform died. There simply was not enough buy-in to the idea that part of the problem of student failure was created in placement practices, and underlying those placement practices was an unexamined belief in the reality and high value of what is commonly called "Standard English."

NOTE: The following discussion on SE is most likely familiar to many readers here, yet a quick review is warranted in order underscore the disparity between what scholars and much of the broader culture accept as truth, for the beliefs of broader culture dominate much of KCC's placement practices.

Defining "Standard English," as most composition theorists and linguists understand, is problematic. Lippi-Green (2012) analogized SE to a unicorn—everyone seems to know what it looks like, yet no one has actually ever seen one. In fact, the notion of "standard" is so vexing that language scholars struggle in deciding what to even call this language. "Standard English" as a moniker itself is frequently contested. Lippi-Green went to great lengths in 1997 to justify calling the language in question "Mainstream U.S. English" only to declare in 2012 the term inadequate and ill-informed, and settled on *SAE (standard American English). She explained her use of the asterisk as similar to the syntactician's use of it to denote grammatically inauthentic utterances, thus marking her new term itself as an inauthentic description of what that language actually is. Smitherman (2006), too, shunned the term "Standard English" and argued for the name, "The Language of Wider Communication" (p. 136), while Wible (2013) chose "standardized" over "Standard" English to demonstrate his position that the language in question is a subject-to-change dialect of a dominant class and not a fixed and static entity that is inherently more valid than any other version of English (p. 183).

Wible's (2013) choice makes some sense, and it speaks in part to Bourdieu's (1984/1991) explanation of how language domination happens: The dialect of the dominant class, "becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured" (p. 45). Noteworthy here is that Bourdieu (1984/1991) depicted "dominant language" as "theoretical," reflecting the

notion that, whatever else it is, the dominant language will always be considered with a degree of conceptualization that is at some remove from actual use. SE is a fitting example of how this disconnection between the "theoretical norm" and "linguistic practices" works in the broader culture. As evidence of this point, the first few sites that popped up from a quick, online search in answer to the question, "What is Standard English?" included, "widely accepted as..." "correctness," "formal," and "educated" as its characteristics. *Dictionary.com* (n.d.) provided this succinct definition that reflects many commonly-held beliefs about "Standard English" in the context of the broader culture: "the English language in its most widely accepted form, as written and spoken by educated people in both formal and informal contexts, having universal currency while incorporating regional differences." Notwithstanding the nod to regional differences," the definition begs many questions: Who has the most "widely accepted" SE and when/how did such an agreement take place? What constitutes the category of "educated people"? What situations constitute formal and informal contexts? For whom, exactly, does SE have "universal currency"? All of these questions that have no immediate answers indicate the theoretical nature of SE, and the last one speaks to the unchallenged belief that SE is, in fact, the dominant language in the predominantly English-speaking US.

This point is complicated in part because the perception of SE and its actual, assiduous use don't match up. Rudimentary linguistics accepts as a commonplace the deep divide between prescriptive and descriptive accounts of language: The rules that govern correctness in a language don't fully match how that language is used in real life (Finegan, 2004). SE is no exception, and the fact that its reproduction largely takes place in the U.S education system complicates the issue further. To say that SE is used by "educated people" indicates that SE is *taught.* Addressing this point, Milroy (2001) argued, "It is important to note, that in the history of standardization, uniformity in usage has been *institutionally* imposed on pre-existing convergent states of language" (p. 534, italics in the original). The primary institution of such imposition is school. However, regardless of how diligently the lessons of SE are presented, studied, and even memorized, "There cannot be in practical use any such thing as a wholly standardized variety, as total uniformity of usage is never achieved in practice" (Milroy, 2001, p. 534). He continued, "They [standard languages] are not *vernaculars*, and no one speaks them exactly; the standard ideology decrees that the standard is an idea of the mind" (p. 540). In short, while U.S. education strives to instill SE and uphold it as real and most valued/valuable, in practical application, and while the broader culture accepts SE as real, it is nonetheless illusory.

Yet called by whatever name and regardless of the linguistic realities of actual use, the language most commonly referred to as "Standard English" is the assumed language of the dominant class in the US and provides a norm, however theoretical, by which other versions of English are measured. In fact, this belief in SE as "the most widely accepted form of English," coupled with the construct that it is the language of the educated, often govern community college placement practices, at least in part. One way this happens is in the continued use of indirect measure of writing ability in the form of multiple-choice tests. While much scholarship has questioned the construct validity of indirect testing as a measure of writing ability and college readiness, such tests are still in place in community college placement practices where at least 80% rely, at least in part, on indirect tests to evaluate writing abilities and college readiness (Fields & Parsad, 2012). Thus, indirect placement testing, with its reliance on multiple choice/find the error/correct answer questions, is primarily a measure of the test taker's ability to identify SE in someone else's writing, rather than a demonstration of how well test takers can actually convey ideas effectively in their own writing. Nonetheless, students are placed into their first writing classes by means of such assessment practices.

KCC is no exception. Currently, the test in place is called Wonderlic, which was selected when ACT terminated the COMPASS placement test in 2015. The sample test provided on KCC's website includes questions that assume there is only one, correct answer per question. One example from the "Verbal Skills" section of the Wonderlic test is this:

Choose the word that best indicates the meaning of the underlined word.

Her gauche manner embarrassed everyone at the party.

A. friendly B. intelligent C. kind D. clumsy

Never mind that the underlined word is evidence of the translingual nature of English, given its French origin; if the word in question is unknown (as the directions suggest) and the definition is determined by the context in which the word is used, there are justifiable reasons for selecting any one of these answers based on cultural context and situations. Yet the test writers assumed that all "educated" speakers of an agreed-upon, "universally" standard language would know which answer is correct.

My point here is not to argue whether such tests are valid measures of student abilities, but rather to point out that, no matter what else SE is, it is construed as real and fully measurable by such tests and the institutions that rely on them. Furthermore, the use of these tests reveals an unexamined buy-in to the perception that SE is the "agreed-upon" language of the "educated" and that it is widely recognized, accepted, and used with uniformity. Yet, as Pennycook (2010) ended his book, there is a need "for an understanding of language as a local practice as always requiring political, historical, epistemological, spatial, social and textual considerations" (p. 143). As such, SE itself is subject to the vagaries of locale. Placement tests formulated entirely on identifying features of SE are therefore destined to misidentify many students' academic and linguistic abilities based on an idealized—but never fully realized in usage—version of English. However chimeric and undefinable SE is, when that elusiveness is coupled with an unquestioned, dogmatic belief in SE's value, the result is a tacit language policy replete with ideology that serves to perpetuate

linguistically-based discrimination.

SE Ideology = Language Policy

Canagarajah (1999) critically analyzed how language-instruction textbooks often appear as neutral purveyors of correctness; as such, textbook authors exclude "the cultural and ideological values that inform the language" (p. 86). Addressing a similar point, Milroy (2001) quoted Joseph and Taylor (1990) who stated, "'It is our belief that any enterprise which claims to be non-ideological and value-neutral, but which in fact remains covertly ideological and value-laden, is the more dangerous for this deceptive subtlety'" (as cited in Milroy, 2001, p. 531). Coupland (2000) provided a sense of why this "deceptive subtlety" is in fact so dangerous: "Whenever we represent 'standard English'...we ignore a complex ideological debate. We reify 'standard' forms and silence the ideological conflicts that have given rise to the notion of 'standard'" (p. 632). Simply put, to consider SE as ideologically neutral is to ignore how it (whatever "it" may look/sound like) came to be considered standard, as well as the beliefs and ideals that maintain its standard status. In so doing, those who champion the cause of maintaining what they believe to be real—SE—do damage by determining all other perceived linguistic variations as inferior to the standard.

A case in point is a particular KCC student, whom I will call Xiomara, who fled her home country of Venezuela because of the violence and instability there. Before she left her country, Xiomara had finished four years of medical school and was well on her way to becoming a physician. When she arrived in Washington State, Xiomara's ambition was to continue with her studies in whatever way possible. At KCC, she was placed into an ESL class, where she excelled. Her success was not surprising in that she had been studying English for much of her life as a student in Venezuela. Once she finished the ESL class, an email discussion between ESL and Developmental Education (pre-college-level classes) faculty ensued about what Xiomara's next class should be. Developmental Education faculty thought she would be most appropriately placed in the highest level Developmental Education class, which is actually English 101/first year composition that is paired with a required, full-credit support class, which focuses largely on study/student skills. Students in this class earn five quarter hours of college credit for the English 101 portion of the pairing as well as five non-college level credits for the study skills portion.

However, Xiomara was interested in taking a different class; KCC offered a stand-alone section of English 101 that was contextualized for students interested in healthcare professions, which obviously matched her interests. Because I was to be the instructor for the class, I was included in the email discussion. Xiomara needed my permission to take the class, given that she was not deemed fully prepared. What that preparation might have been missing was unclear to me, especially in consideration of her already excellent academic record. I asked to see a writing sample in order to make sure that she was in fact able to communicate effectively in written English. I said yes to her enrollment, and she showed herself to be fully capable of reading and writing very well in English. She enrolled and earned an A in the class.

I offer Xiomara's story because it demonstrates how someone with both an excellent academic record and a years-long history of learning and using English was nonetheless deemed wanting in terms of college readiness; her use of English reflected too much of the locale in which she had learned and used it. Her command of SE, in other words, was considered questionable. Her initial placement into an ESL class and the subsequent uncertainty about her readiness for a college-level writing class evidences the strength of the SE ideology. The struggle for all of us who were striving to determine Xiomara's placement was that of deciding where the boundary was between acceptable and unacceptable use of English. The discussion reflected what Coupland (2000) identified as a misguided debate within sociolinguistics: "[This] debate accepts that the issue is where to place the boundaries, rather than showing that the whole issue of boundarying is ideological and hegemonic" (p. 627). Clearly, Xiomara as an LM student was very well prepared academically and linguistically to meet and succeed in the challenges of using English in college-level writing. Our efforts to determine what placement would be the "right" one for Xiomara reflected something Bourdieu (1984) pointed out: "The legitimate language [i.e., SE] is a semi-artificial language which has to be sustained by permanent effort of correction, a task which falls to institutions specially designed for this purpose and to individual speakers" (p. 60). As institutional representatives, we represented KCC much as Bourdieu (1984) described, initially focusing on the degree of correctness that Xiomara was capable of producing. Much to her credit, as an individual speaker and writer, Xiomara did her job as well.

So then, what is the result of misidentifying someone's ability based on perceived linguistic deficiencies? Anzaldúa (1987) declared: "If you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (p. 82). In essence, marginalizing the value of someone's language is akin to doing the same to ethnic distinctions. By reinforcing the idea that SE is the language of the "educated," schools—from kindergarten on up—perpetuate what Baugh (2016) called "linguistic profiling." He recounted its history in U.S. education and pointed out that "the biased behavior among teachers, administrators and staff members… [was the result of] the misunderstandings of the linguistic backgrounds of students who lacked native proficiency in mainstream Standard American English" (Baugh, 2016, p. 9). This profiling was thus based on the belief that SE was (a) real, fully demonstrable, and used by teachers, administrators, and staff members; and (b) superior to other linguistic backgrounds." Baugh (2016) continued by explaining that, like racial profiling, linguistic profiling results in discriminatory behavior based on limited information, such as appearance and perceived accent. The ideology exposed by language profiling and all of its iterations is thus a hegemonic understanding of language variations and their users. Recall Xiomara and the ensuing discussions about where to place her. Had her name not signaled "foreignness" and her voice not resonated with a distinctly South American accent, it is hard to imagine that she would have been placed into a pre-college class, let alone an ESL class. SE is idealized as superior and dominant over other variations of English, and those who purportedly use it are therefore accorded a sense of social standing that is higher

than those who do not use it well enough, whatever that may mean. I would add to Baugh's explanation that linguistic profiling is also the result/part of a tacit, default language policy that perpetuates discriminatory attitudes towards LM students.

While language policies are sometimes planned and intentional (as in, "Don't use profanity in the classroom" or "English is the legal language in the state of Arizona"), often a language policy is implicit. My concern here is more with the implicit, unofficial policies that govern institutional placement practices by covert means. Tardy (2011) offered this understanding: "Many institutions…do not have formal language policies, so their policy must be derived from an exploration of their practices and beliefs" (p. 639). So then, examining the practices and beliefs indicates how unofficial language policies in institutions of higher education hold sway over all who wish to enter.

Tacit Language Policies at Work

One tenet of many tacit language policies is rooted in what Blommaert (2006) referred to as a "monoglot" ideology wherein a society believes itself in effect to be monolingual, regardless of the reality of a multilingual and linguistically diverse population. Placement testing is often evidence of a monoglot ethos. Mencken (2008), in fact, stated a similar idea: "In the absence of official language policy in the United States, unofficial or de facto policies carry great significance...assessments [in the form of standardized/indirect tests] are currently assuming the place of language planning and policy" (p. 7). With their assumption of SE as the target language for all students, indirect tests are specific means of enacting and enforcing an implicit, monoglot-based language policy that affects students whose use of English may not match the perceived, if also illusory, standard. KCC again serves as an example of how this happens.

As already explained, KCC relies in part on a standardized test as part of its placement practices. Yet, there are other assessment measures, such as high school grades, scores on the SAT or ACT, and scores on state-mandated high school exams as placement determiners (Hodara, Smith Jaggars, & Mechur Karp, 2012), gaining traction in community colleges, and KCC follows suit. Its website indicates that "not everyone" need take the Wonderlic and that some of the multiple measures identified above are used for placement. Students who have taken the ACT or SAT with minimum college level scores or students who have an overall high school GPA of 2.5 or higher do not need to take the placement test, except for these caveats: ACT and SAT scores and high school GPAs need to be less than five years old. The other main exemption from KCC's placement test is any student who has received an adequate score on the state's mandated high school assessment test can enroll in college-level composition; the caveat specified by KCC's placement practices, however, is that this score cannot be more than one year old. There is limited utility to these exemptions from the placement test because of the caveats: Considering that the median student age at KCC is 31—well past the five- and one-year statute of limitations for scores earned in high school—the net result is that the majority of students do need to take the placement exam. To clarify, these time constraints are the same for both math and composition enrollment. While there may be justification for using time limits for math scores, their use for composition placement is problematic.

To begin with, a couple beliefs embedded in this aspect of the composition placement practices speak to an unofficial language policy. The first is that the placement practices assume students become less facile in their language skills as the time between high school and college lengthens, even though language use is a constant in everyday life. This assumption makes little sense especially regarding LM students whose lives include a constant maneuvering between and within more than one language variation. If anything, they become more facile as time passes. However, the placement practice reveals a staunch belief in the need for all students to prove themselves linguistically adequate. It also reveals a belief that, if a student cannot adequately identify the language points that the test measures, then they are not ready for college. Yet, as many scholars have argued (Canagarajah, 2010; Horner, Lu, Jones Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, & You, 2006), LM students—in fact, all students—are engaged in a recursive process of developing academic language prowess, and they often integrate already-developed abilities from other literacies. However, those developed abilities are suspect because of the belief that those abilities diminish the more time is spent away from educational institutions. Therefore, this part of the placement practices is founded on neither sound reasoning nor an accurate understanding of language development.

A second belief linked to the first is that upholding the language of education—SE—is necessary. In other words, the default use of the test represents a belief in the necessity to preserve SE as the target language for education. Yet, as Coupland (2000) asserted,

> The exorbitant degrees and dimensions of codification and standardisation to which English has been subjected, in the name of SE, far exceed the need for a reasonably homogenous and identifiable norm...It would also be naive to believe that the English language teaching institutions haven't played a part in inflating the cultural capital of SE. (p. 631)

Thus, schools that teach English also play a significant role in maintaining SE as the language with "cultural capital." Referring back to Tardy (2011), the practice of using a standardized test to place students reveals a tacit belief in and the need to uphold a monoglot ideology.

Another aspect of the placement practices that reveals elements of a tacit language policy is what incoming students, particularly those of color, experience when they first enter the Student Assessment Services office. KCC's website states that students will be asked, "Is English your second language?" Answering this question is problematic for a significant number of KCC's LM students in

that many come from immigrant families, yet did much of their K-12 schooling in the US. If someone spent the first years of life using Somali or Spanish or Vietnamese, as is true for many of KCC's students, but then entered a U.S. school and began learning and using English on a daily basis to the point that it becomes that person's dominant language, how then should that person answer the question? And why is it specifically relevant? The question itself indicates a belief that students who say "no" are probably in need of remediation. In fact, all students who self-identify as having a home language that is not English are urged to take an ESL test, and if they do well, they will then "be able" to take the "standard" test. Bunch and Endris (2012) argued that the question, which is common in community college placement, "oversimplifies the complex linguistic backgrounds of many LM students and is not always relevant to whether an ESL class or English instructional setting might be best for them" (p. 170). Furthermore, the question is evidence that LM students are put in the position of proving that they belong in college classes in a way that monolingual, English-speaking students are not. Thus, the question recalls Baugh's (2016) point about linguistic profiling and links it to a tacit language policy point that says appearance provides useful information about language ability.

In fact, evidence from informal conversations with students and faculty who teach in KCC's high school completion program and Developmental Education courses reveal that obviously White students do not get asked this question, yet students of color are almost always asked. At the very least, the question should be asked of everyone, but even more to the point, the question doesn't provide relevant information about whether or not a student truly needs ESL or more basic literacy instruction, so it is not useful in determining which placement test best suits the individual student. Asking the question exclusively of students of color reveals a systemic tendency to stereotype and conveys a prejudice based on surface features unrelated to linguistic ability, all the while assuming the stance that the Office of Student Assessment knows what is best for the students. Ultimately, there is a paternalistic and obtuse nature to the question, and it reveals the belief that LM status is a detriment to the possibility of college success.

This aspect of KCC's practices bears resemblance to a point Horner and Trimbur (2002) made in their analysis of university English and composition departments: "Clear distinctions [are] assumed between the foreign and the native, the citizen and the immigrant, distinctions used to classify, simultaneously, both peoples and languages" (p. 610). Classify, yes, and also arrange hierarchically. Horner and Trimbur (2002) demonstrated that, historically, those deemed foreign and/or immigrant have borne the responsibility of making themselves understandable by means of gaining mastery of SE, the perceived language of faculty and native U.S.-born students. The great irony/injustice here is that those same faculty members and native U.S. English speaking students were just as prone to variation in language use as anyone else. However, as Bourdieu (1984) pointed out, "The dominant class can make deliberately or accidentally lax use of language without their discourse ever being invested with the same social value as the dominated" (p. 653). Thus, Horner and Trimbur (2002) concluded, "A tacit policy of unidirectional English monolingualism has shaped the historical formation of U.S. writing instruction and continues to influence its theory and practice in shadowy, largely unexamined ways" (pp. 594-595).

The university system is not the exclusive domain of the tacit policy of "unidirectional English monolingualism." In her analysis of community colleges' lack of adequate response to LM student needs, Millward (2010) outlined "the systematic features of U.S. public education policies and practices that ensure language containment and the subsequent devaluation of students" (p. 223) and pointed out how community colleges were particular sites of this "language containment." Recalling KCC's transfer rate of 14% as mentioned above, KCC's placement practices and their accompanying tacit language policy ensure that a large number of LM students do not earn college degrees. In effect, KCC contains language variations by ensuring that a mythical variety of the language is the standard, and in so doing, unwittingly devalues students by reproducing inequities based on linguistic factors closely associated with race, ethnicity, country of origin, and class.

Concluding Suggestions for Institutional Remediation

As is true of many institutions, KCC has a blind spot regarding its implicit language policy. Critical race theory scholars Zamudio, Rios, Russell, and Bridgeman (2011) have identified this kind of blind spot as "institutional white racism" that "continues to place whites at the top and people of color at the bottom of the educational hierarchy" (p. 26). The institution seems to simply not see how the tacit language policy embedded in placement practices refutes its mission statement. Yet that mission statement stands, and the school is committed to living up to its claims. Awareness is the first step to change, and Zamudio et al. (2011) have called for educational research to pay closer attention to the ways such blind spots exert undue influence on institutions (p. 119).

One place where this blind spot exerts influence is, as I have argued, through the tacit language policies embedded in placement practices; to counter their influence, KCC and other community colleges need to include explicit language policies in their mission statements, including but not limited to, statements that guide assessment and placement. If we are not intentional and explicit regarding this issue, then implicit and presumably unintentional language policies will continue to exert an influence that is discriminatory in its effects. Addressing a similar notion, Pennycook (2010) asserted that "language policies have more to do with the production of language ideologies than the languages they purport to deal with" (p. 14). My suggestion, therefore, is not to produce a statement about specific language practices and which ones are/are not acceptable, but to instead compose a statement that reflects an ideology which declares a belief in the value and legitimacy of language variation in higher education. In addressing this sort of shift in ideology, Horner et al. (2011) called for an "approach that sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading and listening" (p. 303). Such an ideological shift would go a long way in remediating an implicit tenet of the placement practices that often goes unexamined. As Pennycook (2010) stated, "When language policy is developed to assist people in their cultural, educational, and

economic goals, a less sterile understanding of language can surely only be to their advantage" (p. 15). Pennycook's (2010) assertion is sensible. Why, after all, would we not want to implement a change that works toward advantaging students?

Yet discerning what that policy might look like is not so simply accomplished, nor is shifting ideologies. Nonetheless, Tardy (2011) echoed Ramathan and Morgan's (2007) call for "scholars and practitioners to move beyond describing language policies and the inequities they create and move forward discussions of how we can enact change in our local contexts" (p. 657). Toward that end, my first suggestion, one that would presumably begin the work of an ideological shift, is for increased awareness of the effects of a tacit and discriminatory language policy that governs placement. In specific terms, KCC and other institutions need to intentionally seek out better data about how the placement practices impact students. This suggestion is supported by Poe and Cogan's work (2016) where they argued, "Disaggregation of data by 'relevant subgroups' is the primary means for assessing comparative fairness." KCC currently has insufficient data that are not disaggregated. For example, KCC's most current data identify 10 different "race/ethnicity" groups, including that of "African American" ("Student Statistics," 2016). Certainly, many students fit into this group in that they have African ancestry and were either born in the US or have been here long enough to be able to identify with broader U.S. (American) culture, but troubling is that the group "African American" includes all students who have African ancestry.

Why is this broad categorization problematic? Four students from a recent section of English 101 come to mind as examples of the category being insufficient: One student was an immigrant from Jamaica, another from Somalia, one from Ethiopia, and one from Eritrea. The student who immigrated from Jamaica had English skills accented by the Creole and French spoken in her home and had been here for approximately six years; she did well in the class, earning a B+. The young woman from Somalia had done almost her entire K-12 education in the US and, even though she speaks three languages fluently, English is what she identified as the one she is most comfortable using; having been an honor and International Baccalaureate (IB) student in high school, she earned a clear A. The young man from Eritrea had been in the US for less than two years, and his English was reevaluated at the EL level Kanno and Harklau (2012) described after being unable to follow any of the directions, readings, and writing assignments in the first two weeks of the quarter. The fourth student from Ethiopia had been in the US for about two and half years, and while he struggled to make sense of reading and writing assignments, his English and reading and writing strategies were strong enough to pass the class with a B. Noteworthy here is that these four students would never be able to communicate with each other in the languages that dominate their homes, yet they are nonetheless in the same category in KCC's database. As Poe and Cogan (2016) argued, addressing the disparate impact created by lack of attention to specific subcategories results in discrimination that is "located not only in individual action but also in institutional and social practices." Furthermore, there is so much more to who these students are besides the generalized categorization of "immigrant" and "African American," yet their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are simply overlooked in the data collected by KCC.

Perhaps even more troubling is what is absent from KCC's data: No available data show completion rates by ethnic background, even for the 10 groups identified in the data; no available data show success and failure rates for students who come from LM backgrounds; and no data show placement results for LM students compared to monolingual and Caucasian students. Placement practices are not only institutional and social; they are also implemented by individuals. As such, they are neither objective nor neutral. We need to know how students are unfairly affected by practices that reflect a bias against linguistic differences. Therefore, the need at KCC—as well as at other institutions—is to collect sufficient kinds of data that would reveal any patterns that indicate privileging of the monolingual, English-speaking students, as well as any bias against specific groups of students. In addition to the data mentioned above, surveying students regarding who gets asked about their "first language," who does not, and what suggestions about which test to take ensure the answer to the question might very well reveal inequities in treatment and habituated profiling. Such qualitative evidence would help the Office of Student Assessment to see how they might revise their practices.

Why is the call for data necessary for crafting an explicit language policy? Tardy (2011) asserted something similar to Poe and Cogan's (2016) call for the necessity to disaggregate data: "Identifying linguistically diverse students is crucial, as an unidentified population will go unnoticed and unserved" (p. 655). Simply put, then, we can't craft a language policy that truly serves the diversity of our campuses if we do not know what the full nature of that diversity is and how current practices impact students. Coupled with the need for deeper data is this reality: Just as the data are always derived from specific place and time, language policies, too, are always localized and the result of local practices. Tardy (2011) pointed out, "One of the first steps programs can take toward changing…is to identify the nature of linguistic diversity within the institution" (p. 654). Crafting a language policy that is not grounded in the very specific realities of the institution would not go much further than paying lip service to an idea. We need to know more about the degree to which our students are impacted by the tacit language policy that guides placement practices in order to write a language policy that is founded on the realities of the institution.

The next suggestion serves the one above and is rooted in the common composition scholarship call for "teacher-training programs…[that] construct [a] positive framework for identifying and encouraging students to build on the language resources they bring to the composition classroom" (Wible, 2013, p. 179). In fact, this suggestion needs to be expanded to include everyone whose contact with students involves issues related to language abilities, especially placement and assessment personnel, but also all staff, faculty, and administrators who sign off on and implement institutional policies. Without explicit training in linguistic realities and the awareness of language-borne ideology such training would create, the institution is doomed to a repeated loop of marginalizing the very students it aims to serve. Tardy (2011) demonstrated the degree to which her own institution lacked widespread, useful linguistic knowledge in the common belief among faculty that "an English Only environment is the most beneficial to second language development" (p. 653). KCC's reliance on a standardized placement test echoes that lack of knowledge. If key institutional

personnel do not receive instruction in linguistic realities, even if they are informed by better data, how would the institution know how to move forward, other than to simply work harder at imbuing students with the mythical SE? Better linguistic knowledge would go a long way toward shifting ideologies and opening up possibilities for LM students.

So then, to move forward, KCC needs to first understand more clearly who its students are and the impact current placement practices have on them. The College also needs to propagate better linguistic knowledge among all who are involved in decisions made about student placement. Only then might we be in position to craft an explicit language policy.

However, I am aware of Tardy's (2011) and Ramanathan and Morgan's (2007) call to move beyond identifying the problem, so I offer two suggestions: The first is subtractive—in light of all of the above, for the purpose of improving equity in placement practices, reliance on the Wonderlic for valid placement information and the habit of asking students of color if English is their second language need to end. These practices simply do not align with serving our students well. Along with eliminating these placement practices, the time limit caps on the multiple measures for placement also need to be removed.

The second is additive and suggests some of what an actual language policy might include. Once the work of uncovering who its students are and how they are affected by the placement practices, KCC could of course craft a language policy from scratch, but there are some resources available to borrow from. In fact, two position statements from College Composition and Communication (CCC) contain points that could be used to suit the purposes of writing KCC's explicit language policy. The idea to "remain vigilant and united to protect the language rights of all language minorities in the United States" (CCC, 1988, 2015) might be revised to state, "KCC is committed to providing education to, while protecting the language rights of, all of its students." A statement such as this could be added to the College's mission statement, as well as the homepage for the Student Assessment Office. In addition, CCC's (1974) Students' Rights to their Own Language" offered this: "We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language." This idea could be added to the first and be revised to say something such as, "KCC is committed to providing educational resources for faculty, placement personnel, and advisors to ensure that we respect and uphold the linguistic rights of our students in the education we provide." These ideas are only that at this point: ideas. The exact language of whatever the language policy might say requires time to craft it, and more importantly, needs to be arrived at through the combined efforts of faculty and administrators. Tardy (2011) pointed out that the input of "administrators and faculty is crucial" (p. 654) for the purpose of constructing a language policy, and to declare what KCC's should look like without full input belies the purpose of devising one. However, devising one is crucial. The logic is simple: The mission of the community college system places value on "access, responsiveness to community need, and equity" (Troyer, 2015, p. 1); perpetuating marginalization by means of ineffective placement founded on an implicitly biased language policy negates the mission in that access is limited and limiting; the needs of community members to get on with their goals of higher education are stymied; equity is diminished.

If KCC's mission is to "affirm the value of diversity and promote cultural sensitivity," then belying a central feature of any culture—language—causes that statement to lose meaning. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the community colleges have the obligation to teach students in their home languages, nor am I suggesting that all students be admitted to any and all classes regardless of degree of preparation and ability to benefit. Yet, as Wible (2013) pointed out, explicit language policies "help to refocus the institutional values that guide day-to-day practices" (p. 175). One "day-to-day" practice that such refocusing would impact is that of assessing students as they enter our institutions. Equity in attitudes toward LM students could only lead to better equity in how we assess and then place them into their first writing classes. Such a policy requires education, effort, and collaboration, and I would not presume to dictate exactly what it should say. Yet I end with this thought: If KCC want to be who we claim to be—an institution that accepts the responsibility to "affirm the value of diversity and promote cultural sensitivity"—then the time to get started establishing an explicit, institutional language policy is right now.

Author Note

Holly Gilman has been teaching academic reading and writing for 18 years. She holds a Master's Degree in Language and Rhetoric from the University of Washington and has recently returned to UW as PhD student to further her studies.

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