

Affirming Writing: The Case of Immigrant Communities

Pocholo Umbal, University of Toronto

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The examples are related to a topic that gets frequently discussed when looking at linguistic practices of immigrant speech communities, particularly how heritage languages might influence the way the ambient majority language like English is spoken, and how, overtime, *ethnolects* can develop in these communities. In these writing samples, imagine that the student is trying to introduce this idea of ethnolects, and how we, as TAs or Course instructors can make some recommendations to make their writing more affirming.

The first example that you can see here is the problematic case, where a student writes the following:

It is common among immigrant families in Canada to speak their foreign languages at home, and this is detrimental to the correct acquisition of English. Unfortunately, many studies have shown that this situation leads to children speaking ethnic Englishes, which are English varieties characterized by substandard, deviant linguistic features derived from their parents' foreign languages (Carlock & Wölck 1981). Having this type of English can raise issues.

This excerpt is problematic because of the overall framing—the discussion puts *ethnolects* in a negative light because of words like “unfortunately” and ending with a statement that suggests development of ethnolects causes “issues”. These two read more like opinions rather than objective statements. Next, the term ethnic Englishes; but more importantly, they are described as having substandard and deviant features. These descriptors make it seem like this variety of English is bastardized by contact. Second, we can't help but ask: why is learning an additional language detrimental to acquiring English? What is the correct way to acquire English—or is there even one? These questions, as well as the other choices of words, altogether convey the monolingual bias—that monolingualism is the norm and multilingualism is an exception in defining a “native speaker”. Finally, I emphasized the citation here because even though there is one, it's not accurate. The authors actually define the term ethnolect as “the English of the descendants of immigrant families which shows clear traces of their home languages long after their original language is lost”. Nowhere in the definition do they claim that ethnolects have substandard or deviant features, so this another point of concern, since this student misinterpreted the ideas of the authors.

The second example shown below is an attempt at resolving the concerns from the first example. The student writes,

It is common among immigrant families in Canada to speak their heritage languages. Over time, this type of language contact situation may lead to interference and the formation of English ethnolects, which are varieties associated with certain ethnic groups (Clyne 2000) and characterized by substrate features that are traced back to the heritage language (Carlock & Wölck 1981). Ethnolect speakers are different from mainstream English speakers and might be perceived as having a foreign accent.

You'll notice in blue different strategies that help the paragraph become more affirming and objective. For example, using the term "heritage languages" as opposed to foreign languages is particularly relevant because the term "heritage language" recognizes the cultural ties that speakers have to the language. We've also removed "at home" so we're not implying that heritage language use is necessarily restricted. We've also used the term "ethnolects" with an appropriate citation; and describing them as being "different" from the "mainstream" variety of English. In doing so, we avoid the negative construal that we get from "deviant" as seen in the previous example. However, the use of words "interference" and "substrate" might raise some concerns. Interference is a term that is frequently used in language contact and second language acquisition literature to describe the influence of one language on another, and the common interpretation is that this leads to "errors" relative to the normative patterns. Furthermore, the use of "substrate" here invokes notions of power and prestige or the lack thereof; and this contrast between prestige and English on the one hand, and lack of prestige and minority heritage languages on the other hand becomes perpetuated. Lastly, it's worth highlighting some more recent developments in the field. One, it has been noted that ethnolectal features are not necessarily a result of heritage language influence—that heritage languages are only one of the many potential sources of ethnolectal features; the phrasing here does not take that new development into account. And two, the last sentence here is an attempt at being more explicit about these purported issues that might arise when speaking an ethnolect, but what this statement conveys is that the use of ethnolects is somehow fixed – either you speak it or you don't. And as we know, language use is not static like that.

This last example is a further revision, and one that is affirming, objective, and considers a more nuanced account of ethnolects, given more recent developments.

*It is common among some immigrant communities in Canada to speak their heritage languages **in addition** to the ambient language of the broader community (e.g., English, in the case of Toronto). Over time, this type of language contact may be **conducive** to the formation of language varieties that mark **membership** in particular ethnic communities (Clyne 2000), with features that **may or may not be traced back** to the influence of heritage languages (Hoffman & Walker 2010). These ethnolects then may become part of the speakers' linguistic repertoire which can be **accessed and used** to express aspects of their identities (Benor 2010)*

Here, it is explicit that heritage languages coexist with English, and so the language contact scenario is more apparent. Writing that this contact situation may be conducive to the formation of ethnolects suggests that contact is one important ingredient, but it does not, by itself, lead to ethnolects; therefore, whatever linguistic features that emerge may or may not be traced back to the heritage language. Finally, by framing the discussion such that ethnolects convey “membership” and that they form part of an individual’s linguistic repertoire, we highlight that language users have **agency**, and that linguistic practices are dynamic and purposeful. In this case for example, ethnolect features may be favoured (or disfavoured) in different contexts to express or communicate social identities.

I want to point out the term “ethnolect” itself is quite a loaded and in fact, it has been critiqued over the years in sociolinguistics scholarship; and I think this coincides with researchers themselves being more mindful about the terms that we’re coining and the ideologies that surround it. Perhaps we can unpack that a little bit more here if we have time. Nonetheless, I hope that you noticed that the overall idea and structure of the paragraphs remained the same, but in removing or changing certain words, providing appropriate and accurate citations, as well as considering different perspectives surrounding ethnolects, we are able to describe this linguistic phenomenon in more objective, nuanced, and affirming ways.