

Vershawn Ashanti Young: *Should Writers Use They Own English?*

What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like? [...] First, you must clear your mind of [the following...]:

“We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.”

--Stanley Fish, “What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3.”

Cultural critic Stanley Fish come talkin bout—in his three-piece New York Times “What Should Colleges Teach?” suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should “clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world” (“Part 3”). He say dont no student have a rite to they own language if that language make them “vulnerable to prejudice”; that “it may be true that the standard language is [...] a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students” (Fish “Part 3”).

Lord, lord, lord! Where do I begin, cuz this man sho tryin to take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan be talkin explicitly bout language differences. The two be intertwined. Used to be a time when a black person could get hanged from the nearest tree just cuz they be black. And they fingers and heads (double entendre intended) get chopped off sometimes.

Stanley Fish say he be appalled at blatant prejudice, and get even madder at prejudice exhibited by those who claim it dont happen no mo (Fish “Henry Louis Gates”). And it do happen—as he know—when folks dont get no jobs or get fired or whatever cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Applachian accent or sound like whatever aint the status quo. And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come saying that people make theyselves targets for racism if and when they dont write and speak like he do.

But dont nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them “vulnerable to prejudice.” It’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. Like the way some view, say, black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language, like what Fish expressed in his NYT blog, that make it so.