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Critical Language Pedagogy in an Urban High School English Class

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The purpose of this study was to examine how classroom conversations about diverse dialects of English can provide a useful foundation for critical language and literacy instruction for students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other stigmatized dialects. This article describes a weeklong unit on language variety that implemented what we call *critical language pedagogy* in three predominantly African American, 10th-grade English classes. Analyses of class discussions, interviews, and pre- and post-questionnaires demonstrate that the unit helped students critique dominant language ideologies, become more conscious of their own code-switching, and view dialect variation as natural and desirable.

Keywords: *critical language pedagogy; African American Vernacular English; secondary education; urban education; English language arts*

In recent years, there have been a growing number of calls for language and literacy instruction that meets the needs of students who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other stigmatized dialects of English (Alim, 2005; Baugh, 2004; Christensen, 2003; Delpit, 2002; Foster, 1992; Rickford & Rickford, 1995; Wheeler & Swords, 2004). These calls suggest that language and literacy instruction would better serve students who speak stigmatized dialects of English by building on students' use of language in out-of-school contexts (Ball, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; C. D. Lee, 2006), recognizing the variety of dialects found within any language (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999), and helping students gain access to standard dialects at the same time they gain the tools needed to critique the power

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structures that undergird them (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 2002). However, few studies have examined the design and implementation of these approaches to language in K-12 classrooms (Alim, 2005; Foster, 1992; for exceptions, see Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Delpit, 1995; and Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999). Thus, educational practitioners and researchers alike struggle to characterize productive language pedagogy for speakers of stigmatized dialects, to implement its goals in the classroom, and to overcome the challenges that its implementation inevitably entails.

A clearer understanding of the potentials of and barriers to such instructional approaches is needed now more than ever, as language and grammar instruction in the United States seems to be returning to traditional instructional methods that have long been shown to be ineffective (Andrews et al., 2004; Hillocks, 1986) and that ignore the natural variation found within the English language (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2002; Dyson, 2004). As the educational "achievement gap" between African American and Caucasian students persists (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability, 2004), it is becoming imperative that literacy educators and researchers learn more about the design and implementation of language instruction that forefronts language variation, students' use of nonacademic dialects, the connection between language and identity, and the relationships of power mediated through language.

This article addresses the need for more detailed studies of language instruction for students who speak stigmatized dialects by describing the implementation of what we call *critical language pedagogy* in three predominantly African American, 10th-grade English classes in which all students spoke AAVE. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1998), we use the term *critical* to refer to pedagogical approaches that challenge dominant ideologies, reveal and question power structures, and foster students' abilities to affect changes in the world around them. We also draw from the theory of *critical language awareness*—a branch of educational linguistics associated with critical discourse analysis that posits that a critical examination of the power structures reflected and created through language is essential to all language and literacy education (Fairclough, 1992; Janks, 1999). The term *critical language pedagogy*, then, we use to refer to instructional approaches that guide students to critical examinations of the ideologies surrounding language and dialects, the power relations such ideologies uphold, and ways to change these ideologies.

A critical examination of language can be particularly important for students who speak AAVE because such students are often negatively

affected in material, economic, and emotional ways by dominant, "commonsense" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 27) views of AAVE as illogical, ungrammatical, or unintelligent (Ball, 1995; Wassink & Curzan, 2004). Through an analysis of students' responses to a weeklong unit on language variation, we demonstrate how classroom conversations about various dialects of English and their grammatical patterns can provide a useful foundation for critical language and literacy instruction for students who speak AAVE and other stigmatized dialects. We also show how some of the central aspects of critical pedagogy—demythologizing ideologies and consciousness raising; dialogue, including decentering the student–teacher relationship; and privileging of local knowledge and experiences—can work in an English language arts classroom to help students improve their understanding of the grammatical patterns of privileged dialects of English at the same time that they explore the reasons such dialects hold their societal power.

Throughout this article, we use the terms *privileged dialects* and *stigmatized dialects* rather than *standard English* and *nonstandard English* to avoid upholding the misconception that one standard dialect of English exists (Milroy, 2001). We use *privileged* to refer to dialects of English that are socially preferred in influential academic, political, economic, and civic institutions and *stigmatized* to refer to dialects that are devalued in such settings. We use *stigmatized dialects* instead of *marginalized dialects* to reflect the strong negative attitudes exhibited by mainstream U.S. society toward these dialects. Such attitudes have been documented in recent research on the Oakland Ebonics controversy and K-12 teachers' beliefs (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Wassink & Curzan, 2004). Finding terminology that accurately represents particular dialects and their use in society without reinforcing existing stereotypes surrounding language is difficult (Baugh, 2004); thus, we acknowledge that our choice of terminology, although meant to balance accuracy and clarity, is not without flaws. Although the term *stigmatized* highlights widespread societal reactions to such dialects, it deemphasizes their richness and value. Similarly, the term *privileged* does not address the question: Privileged by whom? Nevertheless, we use these terms to forefront the dominant pedagogical responses to such dialects and to emphasize the alternative approach offered by critical language pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Language Pedagogy

In this section of our article, we draw on scholarship from the fields of linguistics, critical pedagogy, and the New Literacy Studies to provide the

theoretical framework for the model of critical language pedagogy that we implemented in our unit on language variation and dialects. Recent theories of literacy, particularly New Literacy Studies, suggest that language instruction is an essential part of literacy instruction (Gee, 2000; Morrell, 2005; Street, 1995). Because language is the medium of all text-based literacy and because language is a primary means through which existing power structures are upheld and challenged, understanding its nature, use, and variety is an essential part of academic and critical literacy. Furthermore, as cultural and linguistic diversity increases in our global economy and the United States, students need to learn how to choose between the most effective oral or written dialect for any social situation rather than how to master one standard dialect or form of literacy (Luke, 2004). Current literacy scholarship, including the New Literacy Studies, emphasizes the multiplicity and diversity of language varieties and literacies in the United States and in students' communities and asserts the need for students to have a more analytic stance toward the language they hear and use as they participate in civic and social life. Such an approach to the teaching of language brings the politics of language use to the forefront of literacy learning (Nieto, 2002).

When language is not explicitly addressed as part of literacy pedagogy, teachers may unintentionally reinscribe unjust social relationships (Bloome, Katz, & Champion, 2003; Heath, 1983). Beliefs about language are always inextricably interwoven in the teaching of reading and writing, and sometimes such beliefs do not serve students who are "linguistically profiled" (Alim, 2005, p. 25) because they speak stigmatized dialects of English. As Luke (2004) wrote, "We (English educators) risk becoming a profession involved in the systematic production and distribution of particular brands of linguistic capital without an ongoing critical appraisal of the force and consequences of our actions" (p. 87). For this reason, critical approaches to language instruction can help teachers and students understand the ways in which language can reproduce or challenge existing social power structures that disempower marginalized communities.

Our conception of critical language pedagogy begins with guiding students to "expose and demystify as well as demythologize some of the truths that we have been taught to take for granted and to analyze them critically and carefully" (Nieto, 1999, p. 17), particularly "truths" about language and dialects. Research in linguistics and in education suggests that effective language and literacy instruction for students who speak stigmatized dialects of English often begins with revealing and critiquing *language ideologies*, or collectively held beliefs about language, dialects, and language users (Baugh, 2004; Milroy, 2001; Wassink & Curzan, 2004). Dominant language

ideologies in the United States often posit standard dialects as more grammatical, logical, and educated than stigmatized dialects such as AAVE (Milroy, 2001; Wassink & Curzan, 2004). Identifying and critiquing dominant language ideologies, then, constitutes the first component of our critical language pedagogy framework and reflects Freire's (1970) idea of *conscientization*, or raising students' consciousness of the injustices and inequalities surrounding them. It requires "problematizing that which is taken for granted or 'normal'" (Otoya-Knapp, 2004, p. 153), such as the widespread belief that students must stop using stigmatized dialects entirely to be successful academically and professionally.

By questioning widely held beliefs about language, critical language pedagogy also explicitly acknowledges that our society unfairly discriminates against some dialects and privileges others (Baugh, 2004; Milroy, 2001). Sociolinguistic perspectives on dialect diversity, which view all dialects as equally logical and grammatical, have been shown to provide an alternative viewpoint to linguistic discrimination and a foundation for examining the presuppositions behind language-related prejudices (Wolfram, Adger, & Christian 1999). Delpit (1995), Ogbu (1999), and Smitherman (2004) pointed out that most language-minority speakers, like the students in our study, believe that as speakers of nondominant, nonvalued dialects, they need to master the dialects or languages of the dominant group to gain social power and capital. However, if students are not given space within the classroom to discuss the workings of language and power, then they cannot begin to contest and ultimately change the very systems that oppress them and "imagine better and more socially just ways of being in the world" (Gee, 2002, p. 190).

The second characteristic of critical language pedagogy is dialogism. Any instructional approach that aims to be anti-oppressive and affirming of social justice must, in problematizing assumed knowledge, locate knowledge in the dialogic space of the classroom (Freire, 1970; Kumashiro, 2004). Therefore, critical language pedagogy requires a classroom environment that is itself democratic—where students' viewpoints are highlighted through discussion and debate, differences are celebrated rather than squelched, and no single understanding of language is presented as "the truth" (Bakhtin, 2004; Ball, 2000; Bloome et al., 2005; Godley, 2004; Matusov, 2004). This means blurring the distinction between teacher and student (Freire, 1970) so that everyone can teach and learn through classroom conversations about language, language ideologies, and language use.

Finally, critical language pedagogy draws from students' existing understandings and uses of language, including the dialects they use in nonacademic settings. Bloome et al. (2005) suggested that for language instruction

to be truly critical, it must, like critical literacy instruction, build on students' understandings of the world around them, including language use, locating knowledge "in and around people and their experiences" (p. 98). To make students' everyday experiences the focus of intellectual discussion offers students the opportunity to name their world and, thus, highlights the ways in which students do and can act on the world in which they live (Fairbanks, 1998). Such an approach forefronts both individual and collective agency (Bloome et al., 2005; Freire, 1970). Shifting the location of knowledge from the teacher—as in traditional pedagogy—to students and students' experiences also redefines learning as the negotiation of perceptions of the world, as something that happens through interaction and is mediated by language and the world (Friere, 1970; Nieto, 2002). In discussions about language, the negotiation of different perceptions can arise through discussing the ways in which students name their linguistic experiences with such terms as "using slang" and "talking White." By discussing the explicit and implicit meanings of such terms and comparing them to terms that teachers and linguists use to describe language, students can engage in the critical enterprise of "reading the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In this article, we describe how we applied critical language pedagogy to the design and implementation of a weeklong unit about language variation and dialects in three, predominantly African American 10th-grade English classes. We analyze the classroom discourse surrounding the curricular unit to better understand students' linguistic experiences, their responses to the curriculum, and the potentials and limits of our pedagogical approach. We also explore the dilemmas of Amanda's role as a designer and the teacher of the curriculum, particularly because she, like many urban K-12 teachers, is White and does not speak AAVE.

Method

Setting

We conducted our research at Sherman High School (a pseudonym), one of six high schools in a midsized city in the Midwest. We call attention to the urban setting of the school because it shared many characteristics with urban schools nationwide: More than half of the students came from low-income backgrounds, the school consistently scored below the state average on standardized assessments, and almost all the students were racial minorities (in this case, African American), although the majority of the teachers were White. The high school itself was located at the intersection of some

of the poorest and one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. The school enrolled approximately 750 students, approximately 91.0% of whom were African American, 7.0% White, 0.5% Latino, and 0.5% Asian. Fifty-four percent of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged under the No Child Left Behind Act.

The Students

Approximately 55 10th-grade students were enrolled in the three classes we studied; of those students, 31 agreed to participate in our research. Thirty of the participating students were African American and one was White. Drawing from our observations and transcriptions of students' social and academic talk in class, we noted that all participating students seemed to be *bidialectal*—that is, speakers of both AAVE and privileged dialects of English. We use pseudonyms for all participating students and their regular teacher, Mrs. West.

The Classroom, Teachers, and Language Curriculum

We designed, implemented, and collected data on the weeklong unit about language variation and dialects as part of a yearlong qualitative study on the teaching of language and grammar in urban high schools. The goal of the larger yearlong study was to document how urban high school English teachers taught grammar in the context of reading and writing. To accomplish this, the first author of this article, Amanda, observed Mrs. West's 10th-grade English classes 3 times per week for an entire school year and regularly met with Mrs. West after her classes to discuss common readings about the teaching of grammar, potential curricula, and observations of the students' understandings of grammar and language.

At the time of our study, Mrs. West had been teaching English in urban schools for 20 years. She identified as White and viewed her students' use of AAVE as appropriate for communication with friends and family but inappropriate for oral or written communication in academic and professional settings. This perspective was manifested in her frequent "corrections" of students' language in both their classroom talk and written work. Mrs. West also taught about academic written language explicitly through a daily editing activity that served as the class "opener" each day. Throughout the year, Mrs. West expressed a desire to improve her teaching of grammar and language and to learn more from Amanda's observations about how her students were responding to her grammar and language instruction.

The unit on language variation and dialects was designed by Amanda in consultation with Mrs. West after Mrs. West viewed *American Tongues* (Alvarez & Kolker, 1987), a film about dialect diversity and attitudes, and expressed an interest in teaching the film and its topics in her classes. Because Mrs. West did not feel at the time as though she had enough knowledge of sociolinguistics to teach her students about dialects and language variation, she asked Amanda to teach the weeklong unit in all three sections of her 10th-grade English course. At the time Amanda, who is also White, was well-known among Mrs. West's students as the professor who was studying language and language instruction in their classes and as someone who helped them in class with their academic writing or individual work. Thus, students seemed to adjust quickly to Amanda's new role as a guest teacher.

The weeklong unit on language variation and dialects was almost entirely stand-alone, disconnected from the curricular units that surrounded it or the dominant modes of language and grammar instruction in Mrs. West's classes. The language variation unit was implemented in late January following a 6-week unit on *To Kill A Mockingbird* (H. Lee, 1960) and followed by another literary unit. The goal of the language variation unit was to encourage students to develop critical perspectives on language by (a) critiquing dominant language ideologies, (b) emphasizing the diversity of dialects spoken in the U.S. and in the students' communities, and (c) raising students' awareness of the ways that they used language for different purposes and audiences. The curriculum built on (a) dialect awareness approaches to teaching about language variation (Alim, 2005; Redd & Webb, 2005; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999) and (b) contrastive analysis approaches to comparing the grammatical patterns of AAVE and academic written English (Fogel & Ehri, 2000; Wheeler & Swords, 2004). See Appendix A for an outline of the unit.

During the unit, students first learned sociolinguistic concepts (such as *dialect*, *accent*, and *grammar*) and discussed dominant language ideologies through examining passages from the novel they had just completed, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and then through the documentary film, *American Tongues*. *American Tongues* introduced students to the variety of dialects of English found in the United States and stereotypes about particular dialects and their speakers. Next, the curriculum turned to contrastive analysis, or explicit comparisons of the structure of AAVE and academic written English, to demonstrate the grammaticality and social uses of AAVE, a dialect that students referred to as "slang." At the end of the unit, a guest speaker, an African American doctoral student in educational policy, visited the classes to talk about his personal experiences with code-switching, learning new dialects, and considering issues of language and power. Within the unit,

students engaged in various instructional activities, learning sociolinguistic concepts through film and mini-lectures, engaging in whole class discussions, working in groups, and completing code-switching and linguistic hypothesis-generating tasks.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data from numerous sources were used to analyze students' responses to the curricular unit. First, the implementation of the 5-day unit in all three English classes was videotaped and audiotaped by the second author, Angela; this yielded video and audio data from fifteen 45-minute classes, which Angela then transcribed for analysis. To supplement the videotape and audiotape data, Amanda generated field notes documenting her observations and impressions from teaching the unit. Our third data source was students' written reflections on the unit, collected on the last day of the unit. Fourth, at the end of the school year, Amanda interviewed 11 students concerning their use of multiple dialects. Finally, we gave students an open-ended questionnaire at the beginning and end of the school year concerning their beliefs about language variation (see Appendix B for questionnaire items). The end-of-year questionnaires and interviews were conducted approximately 4 months after the language variation unit was taught and thus contributed longitudinal data to our analysis.

Our data analysis centered on the videotapes and transcripts of classroom discussions because we were particularly interested in how students responded to the curriculum and the learning opportunities it generated. As we read the transcripts multiple times, we began to notice patterns of student responses across all three classes, and we began coding the transcripts for (a) evidence of students' critique of dominant language ideologies and the power relations supported by them; (b) evidence of a dialogic, democratic learning environment, particularly the presentation and debate of multiple viewpoints; and (c) evidence of students' understanding of language variation and their critical reflection on their own linguistic experiences. We looked for both confirming and disconfirming examples of each coding category; for example, we noted places where students questioned why "proper English" was valued more highly than the way they spoke with their friends and places where students insisted that "proper English" was better than other dialects of English. Amanda's field notes and interviews with students were used for triangulation and member-checking (Patton, 2002) to validate our findings. Students' written reflections on the unit and questionnaires were used to analyze what students learned from the unit and how it affected their beliefs about language and language variation.

Findings

Exposing and Questioning Language Ideologies

Exposing language ideologies in To Kill A Mockingbird. The unit on language variation began with a discussion of a novel that students had been reading in class, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. *To Kill A Mockingbird* is set in rural Alabama in the 1930s and is narrated from the point of view of Scout, a young, White girl from a prominent family in town. In the passage that students were asked to discuss, Scout and her brother Jem ask Calpurnia, the African American housekeeper who works for their family, why she speaks one way within her African American community and another way to them. Jem and Scout's negative views of the language Calpurnia speaks in her community are reflected in a number of places in the passage, including when Scout asks Calpurnia why she talks that way when she knows "it's not right" (p. 126). Calpurnia's responses to Jem and Scout forefront the ways in which language use is connected to racial identity and to speech communities. The discussion of this passage was designed to illuminate the assumptions about stigmatized language use held by Jem and Scout and to critically examine the premises of those assumptions. As such, it served as an introduction to a critical understanding of language use and power through a text with which students were already familiar.

During the discussions, most students were able to identify the language ideologies inherent in the passage with little difficulty. However, students often seemed hesitant to talk about the racism undergirding Jem and Scout's negative assumptions about the dialect spoken in Calpurnia's African American community. Amanda began the discussion by asking the students why Calpurnia spoke differently in her African American community and in Scout and Jem's household. Students' responses centered on the extreme segregation of these two communities and the reasons why speaking the same way in both contexts would be both inappropriate and frowned on by members of each community. One student, Terrell, stated, "I guess she's (Calpurnia's) living two lives," and went on to further explain, "She wouldn't fit in. People would probably talk about her like (*speaking as the African American townspeople)*, 'Why's she trying to act White or why she's trying to change?'" Another student, Andrea, replied, "She's got two different sides to her life. She's got a side she talks to them like, and she talks to her people—to the Whites or Blacks." Like Terrell and Andrea, most students readily explained the reasons why Calpurnia uses a different dialect in each of the two communities, the extent to which these communities were segregated by race, and the link between language and identity.

Students were then asked to consider the assumptions behind Jem and Scout's judgments about the dialects Calpurnia spoke. Tanisha asserted, "They think when White people talk—they think people who talk like White people know better than people who talk like Black people." When Amanda asked students *why* Jem and Scout thought the dialect used in the White community was better than Calpurnia's African American dialect, students seemed to be conflicted about whether or not this was an example of racial prejudice or a "normal" consequence of socialization and segregation. Toni stated, "Well, to me, I think Jem and Scout just—they think that's correct cause that's the way they talk, that's how their father talks, and that's how they want her (Calpurnia) to talk." Tanisha also contended that Jem and Scout held this particular belief about Calpurnia's dialect because of the fact that "they grew up there [in a segregated White part of town]."

Similarly, when asked whether people were still prejudiced against the dialects spoken in African American communities, students voiced various opinions about whether or not such prejudices still existed and to what extent. In one class, the students overwhelmingly replied yes, people still seemed to value dialects spoken in White communities more than in African American communities. "Where do you see this prejudice?" Amanda asked one class. "Everywhere, at school," one student replied, but then another student countered, "Back in the days, it be worse for a Black person. Now, not as much. I still think there's people in the world that believe in that, though. Not around here there ain't." The discussions of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, then, indicated that students recognized the value judgments inherent in widespread language ideologies about the dialects used in White and African American communities, but they were still considering the extent and causes of these prejudices. Perhaps students were also unsure of Amanda's beliefs about dialects, identity, and prejudice, particularly because she is White, and they were therefore hesitant to express their beliefs fully at the beginning of the unit. Still, the students seemed at times to believe that the dialects spoken in White communities were more "regular" ways of speaking and, at other times, to assert that negative views of stigmatized dialects like AAVE were the result of prejudice and racism.

These conflicting beliefs are similar to those expressed by the African American parents and students in Ogbu's (1999) study of an Oakland, California neighborhood. Based on observations of language use in the community and interviews with more than 100 parents and students, Ogbu found that most community members believed that White Americans spoke more "properly" or correctly than they did but also believed that prejudices against AAVE, or slang, were the result of White oppression. These equivocal beliefs, argued Ogbu, must be discussed and resolved if African

American students are to learn the privileged dialects necessary for academic and professional success while maintaining their use of AAVE so that they can keep their community membership and identity. The students in our study also expressed mixed feelings about using and learning “proper English” in school as we demonstrate in the final section of our findings.

Deconstructing “proper English.” During the language variation unit, students were encouraged to question the dominant language ideologies imbedded in the term “proper English,” a term they used throughout the school year to refer to the way they thought people should speak in job interviews and when interacting with strangers. The film *American Tongues* triggered many of these discussions about language and power and provided students with a metalanguage for talking about language by introducing terminology such as *dialect*, *slang*, and *code-switching*. It was within discussions of the film that students first began to deconstruct the notion of “proper English.” The classroom discussion excerpted below worked to challenge dominant language ideologies and the power relationships inherent in them but also revealed students’ conflicting and developing understandings of the connections between dialects, racism, and power. (See Appendix C for transcript conventions.)

Amanda: Sometimes I hear you using the term “proper English” to talk about a particular dialect. What does that mean? What dialect is proper?
Barry: There ain’t one.
Terrell: There really isn’t one.
Amanda: What’d you say, Barry?
Barry: There is one, but everybody doesn’t talk it in the same way.
Amanda: Who talks it though?
Terrell and Barry: The president.
Amanda: The president.
Janice: Different White people.
Amanda: White people. Janice, can you say more about that? Do you think that what’s considered proper, the proper dialect—
Jamie: Not all White people talk like that. Some people live in the South and talk with a bad accent.
Amanda: So northern? Do you think what’s considered proper [English is northern?
Barry: [Just northern.
Amanda: [Is it, is it more White, or do more White people speak what’s considered proper than Black?–
Student: Yeah.
Janice: [But there’s some White people that don’t—
Barry: [Yeah, more White people.

Tanisha: [It's not more White, more Black, it's just there's certain people—it seem like we speak more proper up here. But there's people that speak slang but we speak more properly than them. And there's Black people who don't speak properly, but there's people who *do* speak proper when they feel they need to.

During this discussion, students drew on their own linguistic experiences and knowledge to deconstruct the notion of "proper English." They considered the relation of "proper English" to regional accents, to other dialects such as "slang", and to race. Students expressed conflicting beliefs about the existence of one "proper" dialect; some students believed that there was such a dialect, although it varied by accent, whereas other students, such as Terrell and Barry, began to question whether such a dialect existed. Similarly, students voiced differing beliefs about speakers of "proper English." Both Terrell and Janice identified "White people" as speakers of "proper English," but not all the students agreed. Throughout the discussion, Amanda refrained from evaluating any student's perspective as the "right" one and instead asked probing questions to encourage students to "interrogate their own realities and see them in a different light" (Peterson, 2003, p. 367).

Students' comments suggested that they were beginning to see discrepancies between widespread language ideologies, such as the belief that "proper English" is the way White people speak and their own observations of language use, such as "not all White people talk like that." We view students' incongruous views of "proper English" and the racial and professional communities associated with it as appropriate rather than problematic, for even linguists disagree on the origins, users, and definitions of standard or privileged dialects of English (Milroy, 2001). Instead, we view the students' discussion of "proper English" as a necessary and productive initial stage in the development of a critical understanding of language because it prompted students to articulate and then question their existing beliefs, their everyday experiences, and the commonsense assumptions undergirding them.

Our beginning- and end-of-the-year questionnaires further supported the effects of the unit and pedagogical approach on students' notions about "proper English." At the beginning of the year, almost half of the students (46%) agreed that everyone *should* speak privileged dialects of English or "proper English" all the time, but by the end of the year, this had dropped to 17%. Because the language variation unit represented the only segment of Mrs. West's English classes in which language variation and dialects were addressed, the results of the questionnaires suggest that discussions such as the one above convinced many students that language variation is natural and valuable.

Locating Knowledge About Language in Dialogue

The examples of student discussions that appear in the previous section illustrate that students expressed and considered multiple, and at times contradictory, views about dialects and their speakers. Indeed, if one aim of critical pedagogy is to encourage students to become agents of social change (Ball, 2000; Freire, 1970), then critical language instruction must be implemented in a learning environment that forefronts and acknowledges multiple students' interpretations of language use and language variation. Thus, knowledge about language in this unit was predominantly constructed dialogically rather than provided by Amanda. Though Amanda often engaged in one-on-one exchanges with students to prompt them to question and articulate their claims, as critical pedagogy suggests (Peterson, 2003), students' views of language and language variety were always accepted as legitimate. In addition, the students positioned themselves as teachers of Amanda at numerous points in the discussion when they described language use among local adolescents.

Multiple perspectives on language and racial identification. Throughout the unit, students engaged in debates with each other on topics such as what dialect should be spoken in school and whether "talking proper" and "talking White" were the same. Students expressed particularly diverging viewpoints about how race connected to language use. In a class different from the one excerpted above, students were asked to further explore "talking proper": who talks proper and what talking proper sounds like. One student asserted that White people "talked proper." Another student, Shandra, refuted this claim by insisting, "White ain't got nothing to do with it.(…) The White people who go to this school talk all Black and slang-like." Students then began to question ownership of particular dialects, especially when those dialects were closely connected to race. Alicia complicated the discussion by claiming, "Yeah, but it's crazy because I see young, young White boys, you know what I mean [xx] trying to talk like Black people do (…) And there's Black boys be acting like they're White." Thus, as students began to deliberate about multiple perspectives on language use and racial identification, they also began to articulate their own understandings of the powerful connection of language and identity and how the ways in which people speak can signify membership in or disassociation from a particular group, their values, and their beliefs.

Deliberating over informal language use: "That doesn't sound right to me." Students also engaged in debates about appropriate language during the

last activity in the unit, which centered on “translating” sentences from AAVE to academic written English and other sentences from academic written English to the way students spoke with their friends. The goal of the activity was to raise awareness of the different grammatical patterns of AAVE and academic written English by drawing on students’ prior knowledge and without positioning academic written English as a better or more grammatical dialect. Students expressed a variety of answers for these sample sentences. For instance, in one class, students disagreed on how they would convey the sentence, “She does not have any homework tonight” to their friends.

Michael: She don’t have no homework tonight.
Other students express disagreement.
Student: She *ain’t got* no homework tonight.
Amanda: So some people might say—you might not say it exactly the same way. Some of you might say “ain’t” instead of “don’t.” How about the next sentence? “I have been working hard in school all year.”
Victoria: I been working hard all school year.
Amanda (to the whole class): Does this sound similar to the way you probably say it when you’re talking casually?
Student: That doesn’t sound right to me.
Michael: No, I would never say that.
Amanda: How would you say it, Michael?
Shandra: That’s the way *she* (Victoria) would say it.
Amanda: Okay, so different people might say it differently.

In this excerpt, students give examples of various ways that they would express the same idea to their friends, and Michael, Victoria, Shandra, and other students disagree about how they would “translate” the formal sentences “I have been working hard in school all year” and “She does not have any homework tonight” into casual talk. By expressing multiple answers during this activity, the students in all three 10th-grade classes constructed an understanding of AAVE that was centered in their own language use and that forefronted variety within the dialect. This understanding differed significantly from prevailing discussions of AAVE in linguistic and educational scholarship. Such scholarship, as well as the film *American Tongues* and Amanda’s talk during the unit, sometimes contains general references to the existence of variety within AAVE but tends to focus on the common linguistic characteristics found across varieties of AAVE (Green, 2002; Redd & Webb, 2005; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 1977). In doing so, much of this scholarship largely represents AAVE as a homogenous rather than varied dialect. But students’ “translations” during the code-switching activity

suggest that students who seem to speak the same dialect will not necessarily identify as speaking alike or agree on the characteristics of that dialect. Students' engagement in this activity also suggests that critical approaches to language pedagogy must be careful not to privilege scholarly understandings of a dialect over students' existing understandings of their language use. One way to accomplish this is by allowing students to construct knowledge about language through classroom discussion and debate.

Students as teachers. Knowledge about language was also constructed dialogically when students positioned themselves as teachers of Amanda. This occurred most notably when students extended their discussion of the dialects described in *American Tongues* to local dialects. As someone who had only lived in the area for 1 year, Amanda knew very little about the local dialects of the area and even less about language use and neighborhood affiliations among African American adolescents.

As the students discussed various American dialects and the names for them, students in all three classes identified themselves linguistically as residents of particular neighborhoods. For example, when Amanda asked one class of students if they knew the prevalent term used for the dialect spoken in their city, Ron immediately distinguished his dialect as unique to his neighborhood rather than the city.

Ron: I'm a Moorfiliat.
Amanda: You're a what?
Ron: Moorfiliat.
Amanda: Moorfiliat. Is there a particular dialect there?
Student: Moorfield (a neighborhood near Sherman High School).
Amanda: Yeah, Moorfield. Does it have a dialect?
Jerome: It's the same as [our city].
Student: Not like, it's different, like, not even cities speak different, there's people from different—
Jerome: Hoods.
Student: Hoods that speak different. Like we have our own different type of words that we say: Like the North End will say "cuz" and Hamilton will say "messed up" and all of that. You know what I mean?

This discussion positioned students' everyday knowledge about language use in their community as an important resource for language and literacy learning and blurred the lines between teacher and student as the students taught Amanda about local language variation. In all three classes, students drew from the knowledge about dialects that they had learned in *American*

Tongues to discuss how neighborhood dialects in their city were created and how they were fought about among youth, particularly when one neighborhood "stole" a word from another. With this discussion, students moved from the curriculum's framing of language variation on a national scale to language variation on a much more local scale, helping Amanda to understand how a dialect such as AAVE, whose common linguistic characteristics are largely emphasized in existing research (Green, 2002; Redd & Webb, 2005; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 1977), may be viewed by speakers of that dialect as varied in important and rich ways. Through this discussion, the students also taught Amanda and Mrs. West that their linguistic allegiances were intensely local and that their use of language set them apart from other African American adolescents who lived in the city. The students' depiction of their linguistic identities, therefore, emphasized distinct identities *within* an African American community rather than a linguistic identity constructed primarily in opposition to White identities. By taking up the role of teachers, the students also shared with Amanda and Mrs. West valuable details about their out-of-school lives and language use that later provided a foundation for talking about how the language of written academic texts vary according to purpose and audience.

Drawing From and Reflecting on Personal Linguistic Experiences

Students drew on their lived linguistic experiences throughout the unit as evidence for their claims about language and as a means for understanding the sociolinguistic perspectives presented through *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *American Tongues*, and various activities. For instance, some students used personal experiences to explain Calpurnia's code-switching, or switching between dialects, in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. When Amanda asked, "What is Jem and Scout's view of the way Calpurnia talks?" Shandra explained, "They (Scout and Jem) just really wanted to know why she talks like that when she get around her, like, colored people and then talks proper when she get around them and stuff like that." To further illustrate this idea, Shandra acted out a phone conversation with her grandma: "My grandma, she be like, 'Hello?' (*enunciating and using a formal tone*.) I be like, 'Gram." And then she be like (*changing to an informal tone*), 'What you doin'?'"

Students' everyday linguistic experiences were also the focus of the curriculum when students were asked what kinds of dialects were usually considered "better" in the United States, and students began to critique the language privileged by the teachers at Sherman High School. In this discussion, students' views were at the center as they grappled with the question

of language use in school. Amanda began by asking students whether they thought that language ideologies that stigmatized AAVE still existed. One student, Mark, responded that these language ideologies were at work at Sherman High School because students were required by many teachers to speak only privileged dialects in class. In an attempt to push students to think about the legitimacy of schooling to prepare students to speak in a particular way, Amanda asked the students, "What's school supposed to do when the obligation is also to prepare you for things like jobs and colleges?"

Student: I think you should be able to speak any way you want in school.
Mark: If it's preparing us for college, then it (a privileged dialect) should be required.
Amanda (to Mark): But your first reaction was that you didn't feel that way.
Mark: Because I believe we should be able to talk any way we want.
Lisa: I mean, teachers can talk any way to us, and sometimes it's very disrespectful. And we're supposed to bite our tongue whenever they say something or do something. I don't think that's fair. And then when you try to tell on them, they act like they did nothing wrong. Because they want us to talk a certain way, they should have to talk a certain way, too.

Students used class discussions like the one above to voice their concerns about why particular dialects were privileged in their own lives, particularly within the context of school, a context in which the rewards and consequences of speaking and writing in particular dialects were immediate and explicit. In another class, when Amanda asked students to address why "talking White" is more valued than "talking Black," Terrell explained, "That's what your teachers are teaching. The majority of teachers are White and so they're going to teach you to, they're going to teach you to speak proper speech." Many students agreed that "talking White" was privileged by teachers at their school. Furthermore, when students were asked to examine the consequences of "talking Black" in school, Shandra addressed teachers' power to control language in the classroom when she explained, "She (a teacher) don't let us talk the way we usually talk. She says we have to say it right. And if we don't say it her way, she won't answer our question." Here Shandra identifies one of the possible consequences of speaking in her everyday dialect in the classroom: The teacher can withhold academic knowledge from her. Shandra's critique of her teacher illuminated for us the importance of discussing dominant language ideologies as part of language and literacy learning, and more specifically, the importance of allowing students to question and contest the language ideologies that influence their academic learning in their schools and classes.

Overall, students expressed frustration at being asked to speak “a certain way” by their mostly White teachers, especially when they did not feel as though all their teachers spoke respectfully toward them. At the same time, students were conflicted about whether they should be able to use any dialect in school or whether they should be asked to practice using privileged dialects in preparation for higher education and employment. Focusing discussions of dialect diversity and language attitudes on students’ lived experience allowed us to understand students’ very personal struggles about choosing which dialects to speak in school. Students’ descriptions of their struggles suggested that they had to reconcile their desires to be successful academically and professionally with their perceptions of teachers’ questionable reasons for asking students to speak a particular way. Deciding to speak the privileged dialects that many teachers required of them was not a simple decision for the students in our study, and our unit did not resolve the tensions that students felt. However, by encouraging students to articulate and critique their linguistic experiences in and out of school, the unit on language variation incorporated students’ lived experiences as important academic knowledge and served to name the “problem” that could later be the focus of student *praxis*, or transformation of the world around them (Freire, 1970, pp. 74-75).

The student interviews and questionnaires that we conducted approximately 4 months after the language variation unit indicated that as a result of the unit, students became more conscious of their own code-switching and began to view language variation as natural and desirable. In addition, in their written reflections at the end of the unit, students overwhelmingly noted that the most important thing that they learned was that they and everyone code-switched between dialects in everyday life. One student wrote, “I learned that I wasn’t the only one who switched dialects or did code-switching.” Another wrote, “The most useful idea I learned was that I realized that I do switch the way I talk in certain places to certain people. I realized that I do code-switch with my friends and with my family.” Comparisons of students’ responses to the questionnaire given at the beginning and end of the school year suggested that many students changed their thinking about dialects and code-switching. At the beginning of the year, 19% of students thought that they used privileged dialects of English all the time. At the end of the year, only 6% of students felt this way. Also, in end-of-year interviews, all 11 interviewed students talked extensively about the linguistic repertoire of dialects and styles they used with different people (friends, parents, teachers) and in different situations. For instance, Alan explained,

> Like with my friends, like I'll speak slang all the time—I mean, constantly, we never speak proper. But then when I'm around my mom and dad, I'll mix it up a little bit. Like I'll do a little slang here, like "Ooh, that's hard," stuff like that with my dad 'cause he know what I'm talking about. But like, if we're like, going up to eat at some big fancy place, then we like switch it up a little bit, just a little.

Interviews such as the one above and student questionnaires indicated that the implementation of critical language pedagogy in our language variation unit led students to more positive, detailed, and reflective understandings of their own dialect use that were maintained over time. Students' written reflections on the unit also suggested that they had learned to question widespread language ideologies, particularly the assumption that some dialects are better than others. For example, in response to the question, "What was the most interesting or useful idea or skill you learned during our unit?" one student wrote, "There's really no correct English; every English dialect is all English." Another student wrote, "People do a lot of stereotyping." The fact that students' reported beliefs about dialects and language variation changed dramatically and longitudinally after only a week of focused instruction on the topic leads us to believe that implementing such instruction is both valuable and practical, even given prevailing time and curricular constraints in many secondary English language arts classrooms.

Conclusion

Despite considerable theoretical work on critical approaches to language instruction for speakers of stigmatized dialects (Alim, 2005; Baugh, 2004; Foster, 1992; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999), educational researchers have given minimal attention to the systematic study of actual classroom practice. This article provides a concrete example of how critical language pedagogy might be enacted and the learning opportunities that it could provide for adolescent students who speak AAVE as well as their teachers. The language variation unit described here drew on critical language pedagogy to construct a discursive space (Gebhard, 2005) that allowed debates and critical perspectives on language and dialects to be validated as part of the school's official literacy curriculum. These debates challenged many of the dominant ideologies about AAVE and standard English that block AAVE speakers' access to cultural, economic, and political capital. Furthermore, the curriculum provided opportunities for students to compare multiple perspectives on language variety and dialects, including sociolinguistic perspectives, widespread language ideologies, and students' own preexisting viewpoints.

Our analyses of students' responses also suggest that sociolinguistic explanations of language variety and prejudices, such as those presented by the film *American Tongues*, resonated with students' personal experiences. In all three classes, students linked the concept of regional dialect differences to the distinct vocabulary and expressions used by African American youth in different parts of their city. Furthermore, they applied the concepts of language and identity introduced in *American Tongues* to local adolescents' pride in using the expressions unique to their neighborhoods and applied concepts of language and power to the practice of "stealing" other neighborhoods' expressions and claiming them as one's own. This suggests that exploring issues of language variation and prejudice through students' own experiences was essential to helping students understand the complex workings of dialects, code-switching, identity, and community.

Overall, classroom discussions demonstrated that adolescent students understood issues of language variety and power in more complex ways than have previously been documented. Students resisted the depiction of AAVE as monolithic and as only spoken by African Americans. Although all the students in the study regularly used prominent features of AAVE in their speech, their class discussions about language indicated that they did not wholeheartedly identify as speakers of such a wide-reaching national dialect. Rather than viewing their vernacular dialect as a subset of a broad, homogenized racial-linguistic category (AAVE), students' identities as language users seems to be shaped as much by their neighborhood allegiances and their identification as adolescents as by their identification as "Black." The finding that adolescent AAVE speakers possess a multifaceted understanding of language use suggests that language and literacy instruction should build from what students already know, rather than offering simple, dichotomous explanations of language variety.

In addition, class discussions suggested that many students seemed to hold two conflicting views at the same time: (a) that the dialect needed to be successful both professionally and economically ("proper English") was better than other dialects and (b) that the dialect they spoke with friends ("slang") was just as good as other dialects and was unfairly discriminated against. Like Ogbu (1999), we believe that it is essential that the incompatibility of these two views becomes a focus of classroom discussions about language, so that students can think through the consequences of these beliefs. To fully explore this "dialect dilemma" (Ogbu, 1999, p. 168) concerning privileged and stigmatized dialects, the topics covered in the unit needed to be integrated into language and literacy learning throughout the year.

Although we believe that our study demonstrates the potential of critical language pedagogy for providing a valuable framework for discussions

about language and literacy in urban English language arts classes, the implementation of critical language pedagogy described in this article is limited by a number of factors. One of the goals of critical language pedagogy, and all critical pedagogy, is to foster students' understanding of the ways in which dominant cultures subordinate others, such as through the use of the language of power. Critical pedagogy must also address the ways in which students can affect changes in the world around them. The discussions about discriminatory language ideologies and linguistic experiences that took place within our language variation unit never addressed how students could affect change in their everyday social realities—that is, the discussions never addressed Freire's (1970) notion of praxis. In retrospect, students' accounts of their teachers' negative responses to AAVE provided a rich opportunity for such praxis. With more time, the unit could have helped students to create and analyze a language attitude survey for teachers, administrators, and peers, the results of which could have then been shared with the school community or could have guided students in providing teachers with linguistics-based information about the natural dialect diversity found in any language. Simply discussing injustice and inequality does not affect change; critical pedagogy must guide students to put ideas into action to create a better and just world.

Furthermore, although some discussions addressed the ways in which dominant groups use language to subordinate linguistic minorities, Amanda felt her role as a guest in the classroom limited the scope of these discussions. For example, when students began deliberating about who had the right to use the "n-word," the classroom teacher, Mrs. West, asked that the discussion be discontinued. These kinds of interactions and experiences reminded Amanda that she was still just an invited guest with limited agency herself.

Our language variation unit was also limited by an inherent tension in the implementation of critical language pedagogy in schools: The tension between honoring students' ways of naming their linguistic experiences and introducing more academic ways of understanding language. This tension manifested itself most strongly in our unit around issues of terminology, such as when Amanda questioned the ideologies inherent in students' names for the language varieties that they spoke, "proper English" and slang. By framing discussions about language with sociolinguistic terms such as *African American Vernacular English* and *dialect*, Amanda and the curriculum positioned the terms that students used to describe their language as insufficient and privileged a way of "naming the world" (Freire, 1970) that was distant from students' own perceptions of the language they spoke. Although Christensen (2003) described her African American students as

feeling "proud" and "inspired" after she named and described AAVE, and although our intention was to use an accurate and positive term for the specific dialect that we heard the students speaking with each other, we were disturbed by the privilege inherent in having a White teacher/researcher (Amanda) present and label a dialect that she did not speak. Amanda's position in the classroom as a White "expert" on language (because she was acting as the teacher and was known to the students as a professor) potentially implied to students that they themselves did not already possess the knowledge or agency to define their own use of language.

It is commonplace in urban schools to find White teachers teaching students who are members of nondominant cultural groups. Thus, the questions remain in our minds—how does it shape critical approaches to language instruction when a White teacher names and defines a stigmatized dialect such as AAVE? In what ways does sociolinguistic terminology, such as *code-switching* and *AAVE*, contribute to a critical, social justice agenda in ways that students' own names for language, such as *slang* and *proper*, cannot? We believe that these questions would be valuable additions to critical discussions about language as students consider the various ways to represent language through a metalanguage. In addition, teachers of students who speak AAVE need to think through the consequences of representing AAVE as a homogeneous, national dialect or as a locally situated dialect that ties students to particular communities, social groups, and geographic (not just racial) identities (Alim, 2005). We believe that incorporating critical language pedagogy into teacher preparation programs and professional development for current teachers is one way to address some of these concerns. Recent studies have shown the positive effects of preparing teachers to develop more appropriate responses to dialect diversity (Ball & Muhammad, 2003; Bowie & Bond, 1994; Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, & Carpenter, 2006).

In response to traditional pedagogical approaches to language, Sledd (1996) wrote,

> It is wiser to teach the standard, and to teach its nature, as a tool, a weapon which the dominant have too commonly used for purposes of domination but which the dominated can use for purposes of resistance and of access to the best values of multiple cultures and traditions. (p. 62)

We agree with Sledd and suggest that critical language pedagogy can expose the way in which some dialects are privileged over others in society and can prepare students to effectively redress this imbalance. Our study suggests that implementations of critical language pedagogy contribute to the literacy

learning of students who speak AAVE and other stigmatized dialects by revealing and critiquing dominant language ideologies, building on students' existing knowledge about language, and giving students tools to change dominant representations of AAVE. Our study also provides a detailed account of how critical language pedagogy can be implemented. Finally, our study suggests that language and literacy instruction grounded in critical language pedagogy can help students become more aware of the language choices that they make as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners and can teach students to be more critical citizens within a democratic society.

Appendix A
Overview of the Language Variation Unit

Day	Topic/Activities	Goals
1	• Analysis of excerpts from *To Kill a Mockingbird*	• To link the study of dialect to literature that students were reading in class. • To introduce concepts of dialect, accent, grammar, vocabulary, and slang. • To frame the unit as focused on language and power, prejudices and discrimination, and to raise students' critical awareness about language.
2	• View and discuss *American Tongues*	• To raise awareness of the plurality of dialects spoken in the U.S. • To raise awareness of the prejudices associated with language. • To introduce the terms *dialects*, *code-switching*, and *slang*.
3	• Discussion of African American English • Articulating habitual "be" rule in African American English	• To guide students toward discovering the grammatical patterns of African American English. • To lead students to the awareness that all dialects (even ones they called "slang") are grammatical.
4	• Switch or "translate" sentences from everyday to formal dialects and vice-versa	• To raise awareness of the grammatical differences between African American English and academic written English by drawing on students' prior knowledge.
5	• Bidialectal guest speaker	• To present a personal story of language, code-switching, and identity. • To allow students to ask questions of a highly successful person adept at code-switching in his everyday life.

Appendix B
Beginning- and End-of-Year Questionnaire Items

1. How important do you think it is to learn Standard English grammar? Explain your answer in at least two complete sentences.
2. Do you use Standard English grammar all the time? Why or why not?
3. When do you use Standard English grammar? (Circle all that apply.)
   - In my writing
   - With my friends
   - At work
   - In class
   - With my parents
   - With strangers
4. Do you think most people just speak one dialect (like Standard English) or use a variety of dialects in different parts of their lives? Explain in at least one complete sentence.
5. Do you think people *should* use Standard English all the time or should speak different ways in different situations? Explain in at least one complete sentence.

Appendix C
Transcript Key

[= overlapping talk

italics = authors' comment/description of nonverbal activities

[xx] = unclear talk

[words] = authors' guess at words spoken

– = self-interruption or interruption

? = interrogative or upward intonation

. = downward intonation (as in a statement)

: = sound extended

, = short pause

… = long pause or trailing off comment

word = stressed word

Student = unidentifiable student

(…) = parts of transcript omitted

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