Rachel Jeantel's Language is English — It's Just Not Your English

CULTURE <https://www.mic.com/articles/52697/rachel-jeantel-s-language-is-english-it-s-just-not-your-english>

BY MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

7.3.2013

Last week, Don West, defense attorney in the George Zimmerman murder trial, asked friend of Trayvon Martin and case witness Rachel Jeantel a strange question. “Are you claiming in any way that you don’t understand English?” he inquired, though she had been answering his questions in fluent English throughout much of the previous day. Jeantel, who was born and raised in Miami, insisted that she did, but West wasn’t convinced. He asked her once more whether perhaps, because her first language was Creole (transmitted to her by her Haitian mother), she had any trouble understanding English.

West was not alone. In the days that followed Jeantel’s testimony, the internet was ablaze with comments about her “poor English,” some of them willfully mean-spirited and others prescribing well-intentioned solutions to the perceived problem of widespread ungrammatical English. Well-intentioned or not, ungrammaticality is not a problem that Jeantel had. We need to look elsewhere to understand the strange phenomenon of being accused of not speaking your own language.

Some have rightly denounced the racism implicit in Jeantel’s questioning, admittedly unknown to West, who may well have been confused about her linguistic background. But even well-meaning commentators aiming to vindicate Jeantel have not quite gotten it right. Salon’s Brittney Cooper wrote that Jeantel speaks her own “idiosyncratic” idiom that combines “the three languages – Hatian Kreyol (or Creole), Spanish, and English — that she speaks.” Well, not exactly. Virtually anyone who was born and raised in the United States can speak perfect English without interference from any other language, no matter where their parents came from. The suggestion that Jeantel’s language is peppered with influence from Haitian Creole and Spanish implies that there is something off about her English. There’s nothing wrong with speaking imperfect English, but that doesn’t describe Rachel Jeantel, and to suggest otherwise misses — you might argue even reinforces — the real injustice at the heart of her cross-examination.

That there is nothing incorrect about the way Jeantel speaks is not so much an opinion as an undisputed fact that any authority on language could readily point out. I breathed a sigh of relief last weekend when linguist John McWhorter explained that Jeantel’s “English is perfect. It’s just that it’s Black English.” What McWhorter calls “Black English” is a dialect spoken by millions of Americans, and decades of linguistics research, much of it compiled by McWhorter himself, attests that it is a robust dialect like any other, with an internally consistent grammar and vocabulary. Many of those millions of speakers speak exclusively African American English in their communities, only to be taught from their earliest interactions with American public institutions, as schoolchildren, that their dialect is ungrammatical.

Jeantel’s English is not any more or less grammatical than the Standard American variety spoken by Zimmerman’s attorney, but unlike the defense attorney, she did not have the advantage of speaking the dialect that is sanctioned by America’s dominant social stratum. Linguists like John McWhorter fervidly oppose linguistic prescription — the practice of prescribing rules governing language use that do not reflect the way that people speak in practice — which they hold to baselessly and arbitrarily privilege certain varieties of speech over others. Linguistic prescription may be baseless, but it is not arbitrary at all: Prescriptivism systematically and invariably privileges the language of the already powerful.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the Trayvon Martin case, which thrust the persistence of racism in America uncomfortably into the spotlight, has continued to clumsily illustrate the structural disadvantages encountered by millions of black Americans. African Americans are victim not just to gross racial profiling, as was Trayvon Martin, but also to linguistic discrimination, a little-understood prejudice that springs directly from linguistic prescription. Some forms of prescription, like rules against split infinitives and ending sentences in prepositions, illogically impose grammatical rules that do not naturally occur in language, but are, on some level, harmless. Others, like our culture’s categorical repudiation of African American English, have social ramifications easily as severe as racial profiling. It can be awfully difficult to excel in school, to succeed in the professional world, or to deliver credible testimony in court when virtually every institution in your society operates with the assumption that your language is fundamentally incorrect and takes it as an indicator of your intelligence.

Many have already pointed out that Rachel Jeantel was wrongly cast as unreliable and combative last week because of her race, gender, and size. We need to add language to that list. It is not because of her flawed English, as some have suggested, but in spite of her perfectly articulated English that Jeantel was discriminated against. Linguistic discrimination is just one of many mechanisms that systemically disadvantage African Americans in the U.S., but it is a crucial one. There are few things so disempowering as being silenced for the language that you speak.