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## LESSON 2: WHERE ONE'S GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE COME FROM: LANGUAGE STORIES AND THE IDIOLECT

After demonstrating to students what they already know, the natural next question is, *Where did that knowledge come from?* In *The Source of Self-Regard*, Toni Morrison (2019) wrote, “One’s language—the one we dream in—is home” (p. 37). Morrison’s *home* here is a brilliant choice because in all senses of the word, home is where our language comes from. As discussed previously, from our very first days on the planet, we absorb the rules for how to pronounce, conjugate, and order our words from those around us. At the same time, we don’t just mimic those sources; we curate them, meshing together varied rules from varied sources to create something new that best expresses us. This miraculous, remarkable alchemy is done so quietly and unconsciously that many students have never thought for any length of time about where one’s language comes from and how personal it is. This lesson aims to change that, and to help students to better understand their own language and language history, so that the understanding will act as a firm foundation from which to embark on our grammar and language instruction throughout the year.

1. Begin by having the students recall the three grammar and language instruction rules from the previous lesson. Many lessons will begin with retrieval practice because thoughtful revisiting and recalling of key information is one of the most high-impact instructional moves we have. As a reminder, the three rules are the following:
  - All language is rule based, meaning no dialect or way of speaking is inherently correct or incorrect.
  - Language largely develops unconsciously from those around us, meaning criticism of how someone speaks is never allowed in here, as you are by proxy likely criticizing the family, friends, mentors, favorite fictional characters, and community of the speaker.
  - You already know enough about grammar and language to fill a book—or more likely a series of books. Our grammar and language study will be about learning to use that knowledge.
2. Then, to add some depth and clarification to these, teach the following information, which shares nearly universal support from linguists yet is not commonly known by the wider populace:

We all learn language by listening to those around us when we grow up. We listen to our family, friends, neighbors, and teachers and incorporate rules they use for pronunciations, vocabulary, and sentence structure into how we communicate. This process of learning to communicate means two interesting things for our speech. The first is that every human who has ever lived—having had a different blend of family, friends, neighbors, and mentors—has a set of internal rules for how to communicate that is unique in all of human history. It is called an **idiolect**, or an individual dialect, and it is an intersection of those around you and your own individual style. Also, because we spend most of our time with our families and we learn language from each other, most families also have what is called a **familect**, or rules for communication that only exist within family units.

3. After the setup, explain to students what they will be doing: exploring their own idiolects, familects, and personal experiences with language. Doing this isn't easy for many students. Some have never really thought about this before; others may feel uncomfortable because language is so personal and not all of their experiences with language have been positive in school. This is why the first step is to explore the stories of others. The following are some language stories from fellow students and established writers that I share to give students ideas.

## LANGUAGE STORIES TO SHARE AND REFLECT ON

### Student A

I was born in India. I grew up speaking Hindi, and moved to the United States when I was around 4 years old. I first learned British English, so I was pronouncing and spelling things differently than how they taught English in America. I vividly remember when I said "H" out loud, I pronounced it "Etch" and not "Ah-ch." My classmates were amused by this, and I was confused as to why they were responding in such a manner. They then explained the 'correct' pronunciation of the letter. I also forgot how to speak, read, and write in my mother tongue. I now only am able to understand when others speak Hindi, and now only know a limited amount of phrases in Hindi. With having a culture different from most people who live in America, I have a unique perspective that other people don't have.

### Student B

There is really nothing very special about my language/speech. Don't be fooled by my last name, *Garcia*, because I don't speak anything but English. My father is Spanish but I never really speak, mostly just listen. He will ask me something or tell me something in Spanish, and I will mostly just reply back in English, or a very choppy attempt at Spanish. It's always just "Sí" or "No." Same with my mother, she is Korean but both of us don't speak any. I always feel a bit sheepish when we go to a Korean restaurant and my grandma will have a conversation all in Korean as I just sit there, barely able to pronounce the names of food.

### Student C

In my mom's house, where I spend the most time, our language is full of fun phrases or inside jokes that other people don't get, or aren't as used to. One phrase that I can think of is "em-FAH-sis on the wrong si-LAH-ble." That is something my grandpa used to say. Or "purple cookies," which is an inside joke between my aunt and sibling that I know they have bonded over. I know these things and find comfort in different phrases because they remind me of family. I also will feel comfort around different accents, my family is from Canada (mainly Toronto) and New York, which are both pretty strong accents . . . I love my famillect, because it brings me comfort. Even the small things where famillect show up like, my mom was texting me earlier, and called me "the Mighty Mouse!" Now, Mighty Mouse is an actual character that my mom didn't create, but it's something that my mom and siblings will say sometimes that brings me comfort. In my family, saying "You're the Mighty Mouse!" is like saying "You're a lifesaver!" or "You're the man!" My specific famillect is something that no one else has, and that makes it something special and unique to me. My own little bit of home and family wherever I am.

### Student D

When I'm with my family I don't speak English for many reasons. One because I enjoy speaking Spanish more than English and two because it makes it easier for my family to understand. But normally when I'm around friends or my cousin, I tend to use words very differently. One of my favorite words to use is "Maje" which generally speaking isn't a "correct word" to use with anyone. But for me it's a way to say "dude" or "friend." Personally I enjoy speaking Spanish more than another language that there is. I believe that being able to speak Spanish is more like a gift. Being able to go

back to your home country and being able to connect with them by language truly is something great.



## Mentors and Models

Along with student examples, I also like to share professional examples. Here are some favorites:

- “An Offering to the Power of Language” by Sandra Cisneros (1997): <https://bit.ly/3TTgCfu>
- “3 Ways to Speak English” by Jamila Lyiscott (2014): <https://bit.ly/300U4Wy>
- “Til the Cows Come Home: Also Known as a Darn Long Post About Appalachian English” by Kristen Tcherneshoff (2020): <https://bit.ly/48013Kg>

4. After reading the example stories, have the students take a few minutes to reflect on one or more of them in writing.
5. Then ask students to share their reflections with a group and then with the class. The sharing is important for two reasons. First, it begins the normalization of talking about personal experiences with language as a class. Second, the reflection and conversation scatter some seeds that help students with writing their own language story.
6. Lastly, have the students write about their own language. Generally, we share these as well so students can know about the linguistic communities in the classroom.



## Mentors and Models

Over time, the personal and powerful role language plays in our lives can help encourage engagement and conversation. At first, though, it can impede conversations, as going too deep into one’s language story in front of a class sort of feels like letting them rummage around in one’s room or phone. A way to encourage meaningful conversations from the beginning is to build a strong classroom culture of and strong student skills with dialogue and conversation. When it comes to resources to do that, the best book I’ve ever read is Matthew Kay’s (2018) *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*. Kay is a practicing teacher who unpacks in clear and gorgeous prose how to build a classroom where students feel comfortable communicating and have the skills to do it at the highest level.

## THE LANGUAGE STORY ASSIGNMENT



### The Story of Your Language

*“One’s language—the one we dream in—is home.”*

—Toni Morrison (*The Source of Self-Regard*, 2019, p. 37)

In class we read a wide variety of stories concerning the language that people use. Your job today is to tell your own language story in writing. This story can go anywhere you want, but some things you could write about include the following:

- What linguistic (language) communities do you feel a part of? What languages, dialects, and accents can be found in your language? Also, how have any chosen communities (sports, arts, community groups, friend groups, etc.) affected your language?
- What do you love about the language of your family, friends, and those around you? This can be things you’ve absorbed, things you haven’t, or both.
- What are your favorite sayings and words in your own idiolect?
- What are the characteristics of your family? What things do your family members say that most don’t?
- What major experiences have you had in your life that involve language?
- What kinds of things do you think about when it comes to your language?
- What would you like to learn or to teach to others about your language and the language around you?