

CHAPTER 5.

THE WHITE LANGUAGE SUPREMACY IN JUDGEMENTS OF INTELLIGENCE AND STANDARDS

In the last few chapters, I explained that we learn and use language from our material conditions that are patterned from groups of people, who are among other things raced, classed, and gendered in systemic and historical ways. Our different ways of using English come from the material of our lives, from how we work and play and with whom we do that work and play. These systems give us the materials to make the languages and judgements we do. Simultaneously as we work and play, we make these systems dialectically with language. Meanwhile, because the people who make and circulate in these systems are racialized, our language and judgements are made of race-judgements, most of which we have a hard time seeing as racialized because the standards of good English have always been presented to us as a single, apolitical standard and as objective, neutral, and universal.

An important part of these systems that I'm saying produce White language supremacy is tests and language standards. Tests and language standards have associated with them intelligence. Who is smart and how can we tell? This is because language has historically been a marker of intelligence, or a lack of it. And because we have whole industries and disciplines dedicated to testing intelligence and language use, testing and standards become a powerful way White language supremacy is maintained. And because we are all a part of such testing systems in schools and workplaces, we are implicated in these systems. The trouble is, as I'll discuss in this chapter, most of our ideas about intelligence and language, testing and standards, are flawed, and end up being racist.

JUDGEMENTS ABOUT LANGUAGE OFTEN CONFIRM OUR OWN BIASES

Both consciously and unconsciously, we judge people's intelligence by the way they talk or write. Lots of other judgements and decisions, big and small, flow from this one. But it should come as no surprise that those judgements are usually flawed and can easily be racist. The association between intelligence and language is so deeply a part of American ideas that it often goes unquestioned.

Former President George W. Bush was often ridiculed and satirized for his unconventional use of language and malapropisms in his public speaking, so much so that his verbal blunders were called, “Bushisms.”¹ This contributed to many viewing President Bush as dumb or slow witted, but the linguist Mark Liberman of the University of Pennsylvania argues that Bush may not have actually made more language gaffs and errors than any other public figure.² There were just a lot of people looking for them in his words. So they found them. We all experience this same mind bug all the time. When something is on our minds, say White Ford trucks, we often cannot help but see White Ford trucks everywhere. This is a well understood phenomenon by a number of researchers in various fields.

Joseph M. Williams, a former professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago explained how this reading phenomenon works. He called it, “the phenomenology of error.”³ Phenomenology is “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.”⁴ It’s the study of how we experience things, like error or Bushisms, from the point of view of the person experiencing those things.

Essentially, Williams says, if you read a text (or listen to a speech) looking for, even expecting to find, errors and problems with the language, you will. If you don’t look for them, you will not find many. The key to seeing or hearing error in language, according to Williams, is in what a reader or listener expects beforehand or how they plan to read or listen. Error in language is a phenomenon that is a part of a reader’s or listener’s experience of language and what they are predisposed to see or hear. Error, then, is not simply an objective feature in a text or an instance of language. It’s often an individualized experience.

In experimental psychology, there is a related phenomenon called “priming.” It’s when a word or idea is put in front of us, often unconsciously, and that word or idea affects what we see or do afterwards.⁵ The initial word or idea primes the person to do or see something else. For example, doing a crossword puzzle with

1 A quick search on the Internet will reveal a lot of resources on Bushisms; see Jacob Weisberg, “The Complete Bushisms,” *Slate*, March 20, 2009, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/bushisms/2000/03/the_complete_bushisms.html; “The ‘Misunderestimated’ President?” BBC News, January 7, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7809160.stm>.

2 Mark Liberman, “You say Nevada, I say Nevahda,” *Language Log* (blog), January 3, 2004, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000292.html>.

3 Joseph M. Williams, “The Phenomenology of Error,” *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 2, (May 1981): 152–168, <https://doi.org/10.2307/356689>.

4 David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Archive, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last updated December 16, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

5 To learn about priming, see, Kahneman, *Thinking*, 52–58.

food names in it can predispose (or prime) you to see or generate food-related ideas or words later that day. It's the White Ford truck phenomenon.

It's reasonable then to see how our political culture in the U.S. during the early 2000s would prime some people in the media to hear errors and gaffs in President Bush's language. Or those who politically did not align with President Bush might have been looking and listening for gaffs and malapropisms in his words. These folks already viewed President Bush as a fool, so they heard his language as foolish and error-filled.

What I'm getting at is that error in language is more complex than it might seem. Errors and nonstandardized English language are associated with a lack of intelligence, but error is not an inherent or objective part of a text or speech. This makes it an unreliable and questionable marker of intelligence. It's more likely a marker of what the reader or listener is looking for, or primed to see or hear. It's a marker of a reader's biases.

In his academic article, Williams points this out to writing teachers, who often read student writing for errors, and read other texts differently. He's asking readers, particularly teachers, to recognize just how subjective and personal error in language is. That is, readers and audiences form error and things like Bushisms through their experiences with the language, how they go into reading a text, and the biases they start with.

This suggests that writers and speakers have less control over error in their own language than we might initially think. To prove his argument, Williams shows how numerous grammar and style guides commit the very errors they ask their readers to avoid (one of those style guides is none other than Strunk and White's). No one seems to notice these errors in these authoritative books, until someone reads those texts looking for errors, which they will find, as Williams does.

But Williams cleverly goes one step further. He embeds about 100 errors in his article, and asks his readers at the end of the article, whether they noticed any of them and to write to the journal editor with their locations in the article. Of course, no one does. I searched through the next four years of the same journal's issues. No one wrote back. Likely, Williams' point was made. Professors do not read professional scholarship in academic journals, like Williams' article, looking for errors. So they didn't notice any. And that is his point and proof.

Thus, seeing Bushisms is not a good indicator of former President Bush's intelligence or anyone else's. He may not be smart, or he may be brilliant, but someone finding errors and malapropisms in his speech does not prove his lack of intelligence. Finding error is actually, according to Liberman and Williams, a better indicator of the finder's own politics or what that person was looking or listening for in the first place (how they were primed). This is not to say that one cannot

judge President Bush to be a fool or dumb. You can. You just have to keep in mind that it is not an objective fact. Your judgement is a conclusion you are making from language markers that you see or hear because you are primed to see or hear them, then judge them as markers of foolishness or lack of intelligence.

Hearing accents in English is a similar phenomenon. Linguists have known for decades that accent in speech is more a product of the listener who hears an accent than the speaker speaking. In fact, accent is a relative term, one relative to the listener who hears an accent that others may not hear. We hear accents when we compare what we hear to what we consider accentless English. But there's no such thing as an accentless English. We all have accents to someone else's ear.⁶ An accent is just a noticeable speech difference from what a listener expects to hear.

Accents like malapropisms are the evidence that many people use when making conclusions about people or their ideas, conclusions that often confirm our original biases about that person. Meanwhile, like errors, accents are more complicated than they appear. And too often we think too fast about them, engaging in mind bugs like the halo effect, and implicit racial, gender, or class biases that are closely linked to language. We mistake what seems available to us as all we need in order to make a decision about a person or their intelligence (the availability and the WYSIATI, or the "What You See Is All There Is" heuristics).

Regardless of the mind bug, the connection in people's minds between language and intelligence is strong. We look for reasons to believe this connection. And there are lots of narratives in our culture that seem to support the connection. These narratives though are all racialized, and have histories in White supremacy. So accepting them unquestioningly is dangerous because it means we can more easily reproduce them ourselves.

OUR JUDGEMENTS OF LANGUAGE ARE RACIALIZED

There was a funny film several years ago that I found offered a good critique of our world, particularly the overly materialistic and Capitalistic U.S. It is also a good example of just how easy it is for anyone, including me, to reproduce White Supremacist thinking and judgements, even as I explicitly try not to. In a

6 For more on the linguistic research on the myth of accentless English, see Lippi-Green, *English*, 44–53. Hearing accents has also been shown to be affected by racial implicit biases, cause discrimination in hiring practices, and influence perceptions; see Sylvia P. Perry, Mary C. Murphy, and John F. Dovidio, "Modern Prejudice: Subtle, But Unconscious? The Role of Bias Awareness in Whites' Perceptions of Personal and Others' Biases," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 61 (November 2015): 64–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.06.007>; Alice Robb, "A Person's Accent Can Change Your Perception of What He Is Saying," *New Republic*, September 23, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119546/accents-can-influence-perception>.

way, the film is a cultural instance of the Southern language strategy. And I was caught in it. But upon reflection, I can see how I made such a mistake, how I engaged in fast thinking. The film is not just a film. Films are often how the tacit language war is waged. It is vital to the way White language supremacy operates, because it seems like it ain't about race or anything like that.

In the film *Idiocracy* (2006) written by Mike Judge and Etan Cohen, the two main characters are frozen in an Army experiment, forgotten, then awake 500 years later. They find a very different America, one that has mostly collapsed and is dysfunctional because people have become dumber over successive generations. The montage of images and scenes that open the movie attribute this dumbing down of America to both biology and a bankrupt culture.

High IQ couples wait too long to have children, and then can't, while low IQ (and low income) men have low IQ babies with multiple partners. The film prints the characters' IQ scores on the screen, so there is no doubt about their intelligence. Meanwhile, the culture is filled with vacuous and mindless entertainment, movies of just butts farting, and TV shows about a man being continuously stuck in the groin, called, "Ow! My Balls!" Apparently, this is the only entertainment that low IQ people want or need.

This film offers a window into influential and long-standing beliefs about standardized English that are not only false but harmful to everyone. And yet, it is easy to buy into them. The film also helps us see a central problem with our ideas about a standardized English language, one that implicates our narratives about language more generally, like Bushisms and accents, and how we judge with it. Our ideas about language and intelligence are racist and White supremacist.

Early in the movie, Joe Bauers (played by Luke Wilson), the main character, awakens in the future. A voiceover provides some explanation for what has happened to those around him, with whom he tries to communicate:

Joe wandered the streets, desperate for help, but the English language had deteriorated into a hybrid of hillbilly, valley-girl, inner city slang, and various grunts. Joe was able to understand them, but when he spoke in his ordinary voice, he sounded pompous and "faggy" to them.⁷

The connection, even causal link, between language and intelligence is written into the plot of the film. The very average Joe⁸ is deemed the smartest man

⁷ From the voiceover in the film, *Idiocracy* (2006), page 21. Screenplay found at: <https://the-scriptsavant.com/pdf/Idiocracy.pdf>.

⁸ The film makes a point to reveal Joe as very average in intelligence by showing his IQ and other test scores, all of which make him eligible for the Army program that freezes him.

in the world after taking a set of simple tests in the future to determine what work he's capable of doing (note the centrality of testing, even in a bankrupt and degraded future). In this future, Joe's language, a White, monolingual, middle-to-working class English, sounds "pompous and 'faggy'" to everyone around him. Apparently, this is due to his longer sentences, attention to details, and appeals to logic and reasoning. By being frozen for so long, Joe escaped the deterioration of the English language.

This is a running gag in the film. He's made fun of numerous times for how he talks. It's difficult for many around him to understand what he's saying. Additionally, as the narrator in the above description illustrates, people in the future halo their negative feelings about homosexual sounding voices to that person's credibility or intentions. Because Joe sounds "faggy," he's not taken seriously early on in the film. While the audience is supposed to chuckle at this ridiculous haloing of feelings about gay sounding speech onto Joe, the movie works from other haloing of language that the film is uncritical of, a haloing that the audience is supposed to engage in as well.

The link between language and intelligence in the film, which is the foundation on which everything happens, is not meant to be questioned. It's not being critiqued, rather it's one of the tools of critique. The film works from a premise that it expects most audiences will accept easily: Language indicates intelligence. The authoritative narrator, who speaks in a deep, masculine, California, radio announcer English, reveals biases that help create this overarching larger premise. What makes people dumb apparently is hillbilly, valley-girl, inner city slang, and grunts. This view of a deteriorated standardized English is very similar to that of Strunk and White's views, despite the White working-class Joe who epitomizes it in the film. And the key to Joe's connection to intelligence is that Joe and his language are White.

What is hillbilly English? Poor, rural White English. What is valley-girl? Privileged, California White girls who say, "like" and "gag me with a spoon" because apparently they never bothered to learn anything. What is inner-city slang? Black English. And grunts? Is that a reference to an animalistic and primal nature? Is it significant that this descriptor immediately follows a reference to Black English? The frequency of Blacks seen and represented as animalistic and savage in U.S. history suggests that this is a reasonable interpretation. Thus the narrator's description engages in the Southern language strategy, hiding the racial, gendered, and classed associations that the terms in which this futuristic English are described.

Furthermore, many of the actors playing the future citizens who speak in this deteriorated English in the movie are ambiguously Brown or Black. The country's leader, President Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho,

is played by an African American actor (Terry Crews), who is always dressed in sleeveless shirts and spandex to show off his large muscles. President Camacho is a former porn star and professional wrestler. The character's image in the film, who is aggressive, big, muscular, menacing, and often shooting a big gun, is the epitome of the Black savage out to take White women from White men. It's a familiar image that has continuously haunted the imagination of White people in the U.S. Here it is used as the image of a dystopian, degraded, dumb, and savage American President, the leader of a helpless and stupid nation that needs a White savior who only needs to be average.

Language and intelligence, which is often set against animalistic savagery, are associated with markers of race and class. These are the familiar tools the film uses to critique. Most people around Joe are staggeringly dumb and inept, putting electrolyte-filled juice on fields of crops, which kills the crops and causes a famine. No one believes the working class, White Joe when he tells them to put water on the crops. They don't understand.

In a later scene, White Joe is discussing his solution to the crop problem with White House cabinet members, attempting to reason with them. Here's the dialogue with a few of my own cues to help show what's happened on screen:

White Joe: "For the last time, I'm pretty sure what's killing the crops is this Brawndo stuff."

Secretary of Defense (played by David Herman; in a slower voice, a bit confused): "But Brawndo's got what plants crave. It's got electrolytes."

Attorney General (in a hesitant voice, who is a busty woman with long red hair, played by Sara Rule, uncredited): "So wait, like what you're saying is you want us to put water on the crops?"

White Joe (sharply): "Yes."

Attorney General (with a disgusted look on her face): "Water? Like out of the toilet?"

White Joe: "I mean, well, it doesn't have to be out of the toilet, but, yeah, that's the idea."

Secretary of Defense (confused): "But Brawndo's got what plants crave."

Attorney General (waving her hands in the air looking equally confused): "It's got electrolytes."

White Joe (exasperated; as he talks, the camera cuts to various members in the room. All have blank looks on their faces.

They are confused by his words and logic.): “Look, your plants aren’t growing. So I’m pretty sure this Brawndo stuff is not working. Now I’m no botanist, but I do know that if you put water on plants they grow.”

14-year old boy cabinet member (played by Brendan Hill):
“Well, I’ve never seen no plants grow out of no toilet.”

(The camera cuts to Joe. He looks exasperated and baffled at the comment.)

Secretary of Defense (with a look of astonishment): “Hey, that’s good. You sure you ain’t the smartest guy in the world?”

The exchange continues, with the cabinet members, who are mostly White or White passing, simply not understanding that the plants should not be irrigated with Brawndo but with water. They repeat the two ideas that they think they know, “Brawndo’s got electrolytes” and “It’s got what plants crave.” Their ideas about Brawndo come from the numerous advertisements all around them, dominated by a single, multinational corporation, Brawndo.

The next scene begins with Joe asking his partner who was frozen with him (played by Maya Rudolph), “How did the world ever get like this?” He’s referring to how dumb everyone is. There is the film’s critique. The viewers of *Idiocracy* are meant to ask this question with White Joe. Viewers are meant to associate the deteriorated English language with the thick-headed animalistic people who can’t figure out that plants need water, who are frequently Black or Latine in the film, people who elect a Black, muscular, savage, former porn star, and professional wrestler as their president. And their most distinguishing marker of idiocy? Their hillbilly-valley-girl-inner-city-slang-grunting language.

When the film was released in 2006, two years after it was finished, its production company Fox did so silently to a small handful of theaters. It seems clear that Fox didn’t want the film to do well, perhaps because of the critiques it made of large corporate sponsors. Starbucks offers “handjobs” with coffee. Costco is an endless, shambling, confusing place. Carl’s Jr. sells “big ass fries,” and declares customers “unfit mothers” when they cannot pay for their food. Since 2006, however, the film has become a cult classic.

David Fear in a 2014 *Rolling Stone* article called the film “the smartest stupid movie ever made, a Swiftian satire that, seen now in the Year of Our Lord 11 A.K. (After Kardashian), feels more pertinent than ever.”⁹ Bilge Ibiri of *The Village*

9 David Fear, “Darwin, Dar-lose: The Genius of ‘Idiocracy,’” *Rolling Stone*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/darwin-dar-lose-the-genius-of-idiocracy-51831/>.

Voice finds the film more paradoxical. It is genius that “makes you dumber too.” It can be attractive to both the political right and left, he explains. Ultimately, Ibiri says, “we see what we choose to in this movie.”¹⁰

He’s not wrong. He’s describing the phenomenology of error and confirmation bias that gets used in fast thinking.¹¹ And yet, it was hard for me not to be seduced by the critique that the film presented. Our culture is filled with stupid stuff. It’s gonna ruin us all. Originally, I found the thesis attractive and funny. We all can find stupid things in our culture that we don’t like and feel are counterproductive or harmful. But is this just confirmation bias? Are we just looking for stupid stuff to call stupid in a world filled with more stuff that is not stupid?

Idiocracy is not simply a satirical film meant to make us laugh at its critique of our culture. It’s also a reflection of common language biases and ideas about language that circulate in U.S. culture. It illustrates why it is very hard to avoid these language biases, that is, our ideas about the virtues of a standardized English language. It shows how closely associated that standardized English is to our notions of intelligence and Whiteness.

The main reason we accept that White Joe is the smartest guy in the world is because everyone around him speaks a version of English that is “hillbilly, valley-girl, inner city slang, and various grunts.” White Joe’s English is the primary marker that everyone in the film and those watching it use to distinguish him from everyone else—that, and of course, his working class Whiteness. The film also slyly connects the audience watching it with White Joe, and imagines or projects that viewer as White, working or middle class, and a monolingual English speaker.

White Joe’s English is the language by which all logic and solutions are voiced. He is the only logical one on screen at any time. He is literally the solution to the world’s problems—the narrator tells us this at one point. And all these critiques and plot turns hinge on a bundle of language biases, each of which is connected to other racialized, gendered, and class biases. This bundle of biases equate to a middle-to-working class, monolingual English language being synonymous with higher intelligence; higher than poor, White, hillbilly; higher than blank-minded, irritating valley-girl; higher than multilingual, superficial inner city slang; and higher than animalistic grunts. The critique that the film

10 Bilge Ebiri, “The Genius of ‘Idiocracy’ Is That It Makes You Dumber, Too,” *Village Voice*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/10/04/the-genius-of-idiocracy-is-that-it-makes-you-dumber-too/>.

11 I discuss confirmation bias in more detail in the appendix essay, but one might think of it as a mindbug that allows someone to unconsciously look for data or evidence of their original biases or ideas of things. If you believe that someone is not smart, you will look for and see all the markers that make that person stupid, ignoring other markers that may suggest otherwise.

offers is one based on fear, built with ideas about language that are informed by notions of Black and Brown racial inferiority, and savagery, set next to the HOWLING of White Joe, of his individualized rationality; his clarity, order, and control; and his hyperindividualism.

When we move these ideas about language and intelligence out of this movie and into schools and jobs in the real world, they become dangerous, the seeds of dissension and violence. Lose standardized English, and we all become dumb. Gotta test for it. Gotta make it a job requirement. Make sure all students are punished if they don't use a standardized English. Standardized English will save us from a dystopian future like the one in *Idiocracy*. No President Camachos. Put police in urban, Black schools. Those people are dangerous. It's obvious. Listen to them.

These false truths become in our minds a matter of life and death. The policies made long before us, our ideas about language and intelligence, the feelings we halo onto our judgements, the fast thinking that makes us and our decisions, as well as all the other structures that make us in the places we are at, all these structures—the systems around us—tell us that our differences amount to life and death. Differences have been programmed to be understood as bad by our systems of work and play. And any language that is different from the dominant White Standardized English becomes naturally unintelligent or not preferred, not rewarded in the classroom or marketplace.

Those people over there are not us over here. Those people who speak or look or think in those other ways are not just different from us but wrong, deficient, even dangerous to democracy or a civil classroom or the public good. They don't meet our personal standards. We just know we are right. We are not bad. They are. And we translate falsely all of this into a threat, without seeing how the “we” and “they” in all these false truths and logics are racialized. The threat of racial difference is perhaps the most obvious in U.S. history.

In America, we live in currents of racial anxieties. It's very difficult to escape them. They have been formalized in legal decisions and laws, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896, to racist pseudoscience that upholds racial hierarchies, such as Blacks and other people of color being intellectually inferior to Whites.¹² We don't escape our historical

12 To read about racist and White supremacist science that has never really disappeared, see Angela Siani, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); Christopher D. E. Willoughby, “White Supremacy Was at the Core of 19th-century Science. Why That Matters Today,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/22/White-supremacy-was-core-th-century-science-why-that-matters-today/>. For a discussion of how science was used to argue that White people were more intelligent than others, see Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company,

fears and worries in a generation or two. Our fears are systemic, both inside and outside of us. We don't escape such historical fears by ignoring them or not naming them as racial or racist.

White racial anxieties about Black and Brown people helped establish concerns over literacy throughout America's history. This is why one of the first moves in colonizing any group of people is to take away their language. We can see this practice in Indian boarding schools in the nineteenth century,¹³ and the American public school system that was set up in the Philippines to "pacify" what the American government saw as savage and uncivilized Filipinos, "our little Brown brothers."¹⁴

We can see it in the British empire's educational practices in India and other former colonies, where most formal education was and still is conducted in English from compulsory to university. Asking all students from a large and diverse country like the U.S. or India to use one version of English, then grade, rank, and punish them for deviations from that standardized version is a kind of domestic, linguistic, and ideological colonizing, or maybe pacifying, or brain-washing. Whatever it is, it is certainly a language war. One group's language being used to control everyone. And that group, and those others, when we look at the outcomes of such colonizing are racialized. It's a war for White language supremacy.

No matter what you call a mandatory use of a standardized English in schools, it amounts to a White, middle- to upper-class, monolingual English used as a standard. That group has historically determined the standard. That

1996). To read about how Whiteness and White people are woven into the history of racist science, politics, and ideas, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

13 To read about Indian boarding schools, see Becky Little, "How Boarding Schools Tried to 'Kill the Indian' Through Assimilation," *History Stories* (blog), *History*, updated November 1, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/how-boarding-schools-tried-to-kill-the-indian-through-assimilation>. You can also read about the efforts that the Cherokee nation used to keep their language in Ellen Cushman, *The Cherokee Syllabary: Writing the People's Perseverance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

14 To read about the U.S. educational system in the Philippines, see Carolyn I. Sobritchea, "American Colonial Education and Its impact on the Status of Filipino Women," *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia* 28 (January 1990): 70–91, <https://asj.upd.edu.ph/media/box/archive/ASJ-28-1990/sobritchea.pdf>. The term "our little Brown brothers" was coined by then American Governor-General of the Philippines (1901–04), William Howard Taft, which is explained in Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 134. One of the first decolonial histories of the Philippines that explains the flawed reasoning behind such paternalistic racism is found in Leon Wolff, *Little Brown Brother: How the United States Purchased and Pacified the Philippine Islands at the Century's Turn* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

standard is what we inherit in colleges and schools. Black and Latine groups, as well as working class and poor groups, are affected negatively because of elite White racial anxieties that manifest as guidelines and rules about language standards in classrooms, boardrooms, newsrooms, and other civic spaces. And it's all done without mentioning race or having intentions toward White language supremacy. It allows the average White guy to succeed. Why? Because apparently, there is an assumption that this country, America, is his property. It is his to claim, and protect. The system seems to only promote average White Joes.

The U.S. also has a long history of narratives that promote the country and everything in it as the property and patrimony of White racial populations. Our history is one of systemic White supremacist narratives and ideas, which means we don't escape it very easily.¹⁵ If we aren't careful, there will continue to be Southern strategic calls to "Make America Great Again," which really means make America White again.¹⁶

Even *The Great Gatsby* (1925), considered by many to be one of America's greatest novels, opens with popular White supremacist fears of the time. Near the opening of the novel, Tom Buchanan discusses a White supremacist text he's read:

"Civilization's going to pieces," broke out Tom violently. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires' by this man Goddard?"

"Why, no," I answered, rather surprised by his tone.

"Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the White race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved."¹⁷

White supremacy. Scientific stuff. Words published seem to make things scientific, proved. Solutions to civilization's problems, maybe all of them. There's a familiar connection we might hear in this passage, one drawn on by Mike Judge and Etan Cohen 80 years later. It's the great White hope theme. The right, or White, kind of language equates to proof, to intelligence and smart ideas. It's the

15 For a study of white supremacy in U.S. history, see Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Roediger, *Wages*; George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

16 Former President Ronald Reagan's successful 1980 presidential campaign used the slogan, "Let's Make America Great Again," and President Donald Trump used the slogan, "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) in his successful 2016 presidential campaign.

17 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2018), 12–13.

solution, the White savior for a degraded world. Intelligence, good ideas, and language are linked to White racial supremacy. The tacit race war appears to have begun for Tom Buchanan. He could have said, “let’s make America great again.”

Likely, Fitzgerald is invoking a real-life author and book in the fictional ones referenced by Buchanan. In this case, the printed language that’s “all scientific stuff” suggests the real-life author and historian Lothrop Stoddard (sounds like Fitzgerald’s “Goddard”), a White supremacist from Harvard who grew up in a well-to-do, Eastern family. His Father, John Lawson Stoddard, was a lecturer and well-known writer of travelogues. Stoddard is a familiar elite, White, masculine authoritative voice, one easily trusted for his alleged objectivity and truthiness. He is a scholar that Fitzgerald’s initial readers in 1925 most likely knew and perhaps read.

In an article that explains how White supremacy has been a part of America from its beginnings, Fareed Zakaria reveals that the sentiments of Buchanan may have voiced Fitzgerald’s own racial fears. In a letter to a literary critic, Edmund Wilson, Fitzgerald writes in 1921: “The negroid streak creeps northward to defile the Nordic race . . . Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo-Saxons and Celts to enter.” And a bit later in the letter: “We are as far above the modern Frenchman as he is above the Negro.” This letter comes four years before publishing his famous novel. Fitzgerald was racist.

In 1920, one year before the letter and five before *the novel*, Lothrop Stoddard published *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World Supremacy*. It’s the book that Fitzgerald is likely invoking in the novel. Fitzgerald’s references to the “rise of the colored empires” and the White race being “submerged” call on the same language and metaphors that Stoddard uses. Stoddard was a vocal White supremacist. In the book, he argues that increasing populations of people of color around the world threaten the White geographic, economic, and political center. People of color are taking over White racial settlements, and this is a bad thing. Strategically, Stoddard notes, there are inner and outer dikes that must be attended.¹⁸

The outer dikes of White civilization are those places in the world that contain mostly people of color, but the inner are those places on the globe that are White settlements in which people of color are increasing. Those areas must be protected because they are the last defense of the White centers of property. It is not hard to hear a logic that associates race, intelligence, worth, value, and language in Stoddard’s own words. In a chapter called “The White Flood,” he explains:

18 Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 226.

For instance: biologists had recently formulated the law of the “Survival of the Fittest.” This sounded very well. Accordingly, the public, in conformity with the prevailing optimism, promptly interpreted “fittest” as synonymous with “best,” in utter disregard of the grim truth that by “fittest” nature denotes only the type best adapted to existing conditions of environment, and that if the environment favors a low type, this low type (unless humanly prevented) will win, regardless of all other considerations. So again with economics. A generation ago relatively few persons realized that low-standard men would drive out high-standard men as inevitably as bad money drives out good, no matter what the results to society and the future of mankind. These are but two instances of that shallow, cock-sure nineteenth-century optimism, based upon ignorance and destined to be so swiftly and tragically disillusioned.¹⁹

The world I imagine Stoddard and Fitzgerald seeing in the future, one with tides of color washing over inner dikes, one with Black and Brown bodies creeping “northward to defile the Nordic race,” is a world that *Idiocracy* has envisioned as well. The White anxieties of tides of color in this passage percolate underneath it. The downfall, the degradation, the erosion of Western civilization begins with language, the marker of intelligence and scientific proof of “low-type” and “high-standard men.” Between 1920 and 2006, the same racial anxieties are voiced, first by an avowed White supremacist, then by a mainstream Hollywood film. And it continues to be voiced by presidents using the Southern language strategy of making America great again.

The defense of inner dikes and White property always assumes violence. In all of these examples—*Idiocracy*, Stoddard’s scholarship, Fitzgerald’s letters, Tom Buchanan’s words in *The Great Gatsby*, making America great again—there is an implicit threat of race war, of violence. The White subject, the average White Joe, cannot sit by and do nothing. What is missed, of course, is that the world and everything in it is not his to conquer or take. It ain’t his patrimony. Our fast ideas about language are interlaced with our historical ideas about race, intelligence, and the White property of literacy that White supremacist systems say must be protected from the rising tides of color.²⁰

19 Stoddard, 150.

20 To read more about how historically in the US literacy has been seen as White property, see Prendergast, *Literacy*. To read about the way the U.S. justice system has defined White property, see Harris, “Whiteness.”

This argument of precious inner dikes is still used today, only with different, less overly racialized language. Our arguments today engage in the Southern language strategy. Education, schools, and literacy in the US are inner dikes that teachers and others too often protect from the rising tide of students of color. Schools use language standards and standardized test scores to stem the tide. Racist intentions are not necessary because White supremacist outcomes are inevitable in systems built to produce such results. We have already inherited Stoddard's ideas and forgotten their origins and histories. This is why I could watch *Idiocracy* and think it was good, sound critique.

We don't think that what those ideas produce, their consequences to people, are racist. But inevitably, the ideas about language and intelligence have shaped our thoughts about language and people. They have become a part of our normal thinking. Our arguments now are about clear expression, literacy standards, good communication, but the racialized consequences are the same as they've always been.

And so, we see the same flawed, White supremacist ideas about language in our schools as we do in *Idiocracy*. Blacks, Latine, and poor Whites are harmed most, or just left out, by dike logic, not because they are the underclasses, but because they don't use or can't learn quick enough the right kind of English, the smart kind, the White kind. Material conditions of people matter to their languaging in the world. We are what we do in the places we are at with the people there.

And so, the system rewards average White Joes mostly—they appear to be our saviors. We have seductive ideas about language and intelligence, but they are racially flawed because we don't investigate them carefully enough. It is difficult to notice when our ideas about language and intelligence are racist because they are our systems, our biases, our histories. They seem so natural because they feel as if they've always been with us and in us.

PROBLEMS WITH ENGLISH STANDARDS IN TESTS

During the summer before my senior year in high school, I took the SAT twice. I had just moved to Corvallis, Oregon, where Oregon State University resides. It felt like a poshy, elite, and very White town. The school I went to, one of only two in that college town, was at the time the more affluent one, Crescent Valley High School. The first day I walked into the school, I saw a long list of student names posted in big letters in the hallway near my locker. There must have been several hundred names. It was the school's honor roll, those who had gotten at least a 3.5 GPA the previous year.

I thought, holy shit, everyone in this school is on the honor roll! While this wasn't true, what was true was that the school was quite elite, middle- to

upper-middle-class, and very White. In fact, besides my brother and me, there were only three or four other students of color and only one Black teacher. Everyone else was White. The entire year that I was there, I never had a class with anyone of color, student or teacher. Then again, even in my more diverse schools in Las Vegas and North LV, I had no teachers of color.

So when the results of our SATs came in the mail, I was very nervous. It wasn't just because I felt out of place and unprepared for what I saw as a high-powered academic high school, but I knew I hadn't done well on the test. I just didn't know exactly how badly. News started going around. So-and-so got a 1450. She got a 1500. He got a 1250.

To get a 1500 is to score better than 99 percent of those who take the test. A score of 1450 means you are in the 97th percentile. A respectable score is something like 1250 (the 81st percentile). While I don't remember my exact score, I do know that I scored so low that I felt ashamed to tell anyone, not my brother, not my friends, not even my girlfriend. My score wasn't even four digits. It was three, like 900 maybe. That means that 78 percent of those taking the SAT that year scored better than me. To my friends, I said that I did okay. Made excuses. Didn't remember the number. I wasn't worried.

But really, I was frightened. I thought I had just blown my chance at college. It figured, I thought. Didn't think I was college material anyway. Who was I fooling? Trying to be like all these rich, White kids. I ripped up the slip of paper that showed my failure. I didn't even bother to apply to the one university I'd planned on attending, Oregon State University, the school that resided in that town. I only got in because my aunt, my mom's sister, who lived in Corvallis too and was married to a professor at the university (Uncle Bill), filled out all the application forms for me, even the FAFSA for my financial aid. By the time she'd finished doing it, and I had to sign them, I was embarrassed. We had to disclose that really low SAT score.

Years later, my GRE score was not much better, also embarrassingly low—and I took that twice too! Part of the reason I even found Washington State University when I applied for graduate school the second time was because their English Department didn't use GRE scores to determine acceptance into their graduate programs.²¹ What luck, I thought.

But by these standardized tests, I should be a failure. I should not have done well as an undergraduate student, but I was on the honor roll from my

21 Previous to WSU, I stayed at OSU and got my master's degree in part because my GRE scores were so low that no other graduate school I applied to accepted me. I am grateful that I was known in the English Department at OSU already because I'd gotten my bachelor's degree there and also grateful that they were willing to ignore my low GRE scores and admit me as a master's degree student.

sophomore year on. And I was taking 18 credits each term in my final two years there, since it was cheaper to do so. In grad school, I got all A's and one B. The B happened during my first semester at Oregon State (I got my master's degree at OSU and my Ph.D. at WSU), and it was a product of a dysfunctional group project. We were all learning how to be grad students.

So how could those standardized tests be so wrong about me? They didn't predict anything about me. They didn't predict how well I'd do grade-wise in college or grad school. They didn't predict that I'd pass my Ph.D. qualifying exams with honors. They didn't predict that I'd publish a version of my master's thesis, a rare thing to do. They didn't predict that I'd be a college professor or an associate dean in one of the largest universities in the US. They didn't predict that I'd research, write, and publish numerous articles, book chapters, and books on language and racism. They didn't predict that I'd win numerous national awards for my scholarship. They didn't predict that I'd be elected as the leader of my academic field's biggest organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. If the SAT percentile system is accurate, then I'm in the lowest quarter of academics. That is, 78 percent of my peers should have better resumes than me and be more accomplished.

More likely, my experience with those standardized tests explains how I am actually different from most successful academics, how my academic norms, my habits and dispositions with language, are not always well-fitted to conventional, White, academic standards exclusively used in tests like the SAT and the GRE. My low scores likely show how I was unable—or maybe unwilling—to HOWL like a good student. I have not waded into the waters of the academy cautiously, but I do swim in the current well now. I have made waves and created new currents for others after me to follow in or paddle against.

In my case, my ill-fitting habits, my strange orientation to language and the entire academic enterprise, did not mean something more tragic, like failure or dropping out of college, although it could have very easily. I did drop out of college twice. I was lucky to have a supportive aunt who took it upon herself to make sure that my application for college was in on time. I was privileged enough to have an uncle who was a professor at the same university I would graduate from. I was lucky to have a mom whom I loved and who loved me, who sat on weekends reading Harlequin romance novels by the dozens. I was lucky to halo my feelings about my mom to my feelings about words and books. I was lucky that I was a Brown kid who had White women helping me at every step of the way, White women who spoke White, middle-class English and knew enough about college systems to sneak me in. I was lucky to have a twin brother who played D&D with me. I was lucky I had Schmindrake to show me how to cast spells, to be a hero, a mage. I was lucky to be poor, lucky to find ways to make ends-meet.

But really, I wasn't lucky in the conventional sense. These were my conditions in which I learned language. I was able to find ways to use them to keep moving through, to be the exception, but my movement wasn't always easy. Like everyone else, testing in school was a part of my conditions. Like the SAT, tests are usually gates to other places, like college, jobs, and other opportunities and rewards. Gates are usually guarded. In most cases, the testing gates are guarded and locked by standards. Standards in tests are perhaps the most obvious front in the language war.

There are at least three deep problems with tests of English language proficiency and the standards that they are based on. For most, these problems are not easy to see. When left unaddressed in large scale tests and course curricula, these three problems amount to English language standards that reproduce White language supremacy and racist outcomes in schools and society. They are the hidden ways that the tacit language war is won. They are how White language supremacy occurs without anyone being White supremacist. The first is a straight forward problem, while the other two are less so.

PROBLEM 1. THOSE WHO HAVE MORE POWER GET TO MAKE STANDARDS OF ENGLISH IN TESTS

I've discussed this in various ways, particularly when it comes to style guides. Those who end up ruling make the rules. But let's think about this more deeply. When we talk about standards of English, regardless of the context or people, we are rarely referencing exactly the same things. We've all experienced this in classrooms. A teacher asks for a clear summary of another text, but then they say your summary is not clear, nor does it have the appropriate information in it. You are confused. You thought you were clear and included all the necessary information. Both your teacher and you were working from the same two criteria for the summary: Be clear and include the appropriate details from the original text in your summary.

Because we usually default to the teacher's standard, the teacher's view of things, we give up our original one. This can be okay, but let's not forget that we were still working from the same criteria, the same standards. We just had different ideas about what "clear" and "appropriate details" meant and how to accomplish those things in a summary. The teacher, because they have more power in the classroom (and because you've acquiesced to that power, usually out of necessity—that's actually coercion if you had no say in the choice), gets to decide whose version of the standard is appropriate or correct. But this difference in power doesn't make one view of the same standard better than the other. It simply means that the teacher gets to decide for the same reasons Strunk and

White got to decide good language practice. The politics of the classroom are in the teacher's favor, and students must accept this.

There are good reasons to accept the teacher's ideas about clarity and appropriate details in summaries of texts, but the student should have an opportunity to negotiate what the goals of their learning in that classroom will be, which will then dictate how to use a teacher's and students' different standards. Of course, I'm arguing here not just for a new kind of student-centered teaching and learning. I'm arguing for a classroom that structures power differently. It's a classroom that does not validate or reinforce only a teacher's power over standards that get used against students. It doesn't take for granted, or assume, one standard for language. It's a classroom that negotiates a teacher's authority with a student's informed goals for the class in order to figure out what to do about standards, how to use the various ones that exist in the classroom already in equitable ways, and how to give those who have not controlled standards of English more control.

PROBLEM 2. TESTS CREATE WHAT THEY TEST

F. Allan Hanson, a professor emeritus in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Kansas, has argued that "tests do not simply report on pre-existing facts," instead "they actually produce or fabricate the traits and capacities that they supposedly measure."²² His book details numerous ways this happens, and has happened throughout history in various tests in our contemporary lives, from SATs and classroom testing, to IQ tests and drivers licensing.

He opens the book with the historical practice that occurred from at least the fourteenth to the seventeenth century in Europe and later in America called "swimming a witch."²³ The test of witch swimming was to determine if an individual was a witch or not, and it had theological implications to the community beyond the deadly implications to the individual accused. There needed to be a test that could not simply determine if an accused woman was a witch but root out the Devil (capital "D") in the world and maintain God's (capital "G") superiority. This test, much like our associations with language, was meant to show us a person's moral value, their goodness or evilness. But it clearly had a lot of haloing happening with it, and it worked from the fast thinking of the WYSIATI heuristic.²⁴

22 F. Allan Hanson, *Testing Testing: Social Consequences of the Examined Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 284.

23 Hanson, 36–42.

24 The WYSIATI, or "What You See Is All There Is," heuristic is another mind process of Kahneman's. It's fast thinking that is similar to the availability heuristic. WYSIATI happens

The test was simple. In most cases, the accused was tied right thumb to left big toe and left thumb to right big toe, then lowered into water by a rope around their waist. If they floated, they were a witch. If they sank, then not a witch (sometimes it was the opposite). Today, we can see right through this test. There are no such things as witches, at least not the kind that the folks of sixteenth-century Europe were worried about. We also know that a person's buoyancy says nothing about any supernatural powers they may have, putting aside the fact that supernatural powers don't exist.

One's buoyancy has to do with their body's density compared to the density of the water they are dunked into. Salt water, for example, is denser than freshwater, and colder water is denser than warmer water.²⁵ A person's density will also be affected by how much air is in their lungs, how big their lungs are, the amount and kind of clothing they have on, how much body fat to muscle they have (muscle is denser than fat), etc. The point is we can see today that this test didn't test one's witchy-ness, rather it tested more directly how buoyant the accused person was relative to the kind of water they were being dunked into that day. Like Williams' phenomenology of error or hearing accents and Bushisms, this test tells us more about the biases of the test makers than about the qualities of the test takers. They saw witches. They just needed some kind of evidence to confirm it.

Putting all that aside, witch swimming was still a test. It measured the construct of a witch as defined by the test, or something equivalent to one's buoyancy. That is, as Hanson explains, the witch construct is created by the test itself. Without the test, you don't have witches. What is a witch? Well, witches are the people who float (or don't float) when tested in this way. The test literally creates witches. This same dynamic occurs in classrooms, IQ tests, and SATs. Take IQ. That test, or rather that battery of tests, offers a score typically between 69–130, but most score between 80–130, with 90–110 being considered average—that's the middle category created by the test and demonstrated in a large distribution of scores on the test. Those average IQ scores of 90–110 are within one standard deviation from the mean or middle score of 100. This part of the distribution of all scores creates that average IQ score range.

The point is, what does an IQ score actually measure? Is it really something called "intelligence" that can be understood in a linear fashion or by a score? Is

when someone operates from the assumption that the information in front of them is all they need to make a more complex or global claim or argument. In lay terms, it could be thought of as jumping too quickly to conclusions, or judgements, from limited data. See Kahneman, *Thinking*.

25 Here's a test: put an egg in a glass of water, then take it out, put a few tablespoons of salt in the same glass of water, mix, and drop the egg in. The water's density has changed.

someone who scores a 120 dumber or less capable than one who scores a 121 or 122 at whatever tasks or problems we are talking about? Does IQ really tell us something about how smart we are? If not, what is IQ? That is, what is the construct the test calls IQ? What exactly is the “intelligence” in “intelligence quotient”? Before 1904, IQ was meaningless because the IQ test didn’t exist. So what was intelligence before IQ tests? We’ve lived with IQs for so long that the idea of someone possessing a high or low IQ seems real and natural. It’s become a part of our systems, our conditions, but we’ve made this idea up.

Stephen Jay Gould, in his famous book *The Mismeasure of Man*, explains how scientists throughout history, particularly in the sciences of measurement and the testing of people’s intelligence, have created such concepts like IQ, then measured people by them. Gould explains two fallacies that occur when we test intelligence, measure it with a single number, then rank people by their numbers. The first fallacy is one of “reification,” or when we “convert abstract concepts into entities” then refer to those entities as if they were real in the world, as if they existed materially.²⁶

In other words, we take a test that is meant to account for a large collection of cognitive and other capabilities that are complex and diverse, that create things and solve problems in the world in particular human situations and environments, then call what the test measures “intelligence,” or in this case, IQ. Further, we use that new thing, IQ, as if it were real like a chair is real. We reify a bundle of actions, ideas, competencies, and cognitive skills that are allegedly all accounted for in the test, then rank people, or bestow privileges and opportunities, based on their scores or rankings.

Cathy O’Neil, a data scientist with a Ph.D. from Harvard in mathematics, explains this same phenomenon from a math and programming perspective in the world of big data. O’Neil discusses the ways that the hidden (to most) biases in the models used for programs that mine big data on people today do more harm than good. They tend to increase inequality in groups of people while increasing profits in corporations and entities that use big data and statistical algorithms to make decisions. These data models, with bad, unchecked biases, O’Neil calls “Weapons of Math Destruction” or WMDs.²⁷

The SAT and GPAs in school work the same way. Is someone with a higher SAT score or GPA in school smarter than someone with a lower score or GPA? We often think so or make decisions from this fast thinking because we’ve accepted the reification of intelligence by equating it to such scores. We’ve also accepted

26 Gould, *Mismeasure*, 24–25.

27 Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016).

the models of intelligence, good language, and good students hardwired in the biases of the test's models, that is, the constructs each test uses to design tasks and their appropriate answers. But maybe most people with higher GPAs or SATs have them because their conditions afford them such scores, because they come from the same places in society, use the same kinds of languages, as those who make the models and constructs. Their biases are similar.

But our reifications may still be useful predictors, some may say. Even if they don't measure anything real, some argue that tests like the SAT can be predictive of future college performance when used with other factors, like GPA. But this isn't how most of us think about, refer to, and use such scores. We don't talk about GPAs or SATs as merely providing a degree of future success. In my experience, most people make loose equations between the score and intelligence. The smart kids are the ones with the 4.0 GPAs. Even if we accept that these students are smart, it doesn't mean that those with lower GPAs are not.

And yet, we often make such loose equations between test scores and GPAs to intelligence. These ways of quantifying intelligence have racial implications because GPAs and test scores are connected to conditions that afford higher or lower results. In our systems, because those systems are already made racist, most quantified ways of representing intelligence and language ability have White supremacist outcomes. We can see this in how folks talk publicly about such tests and scores.

William Shockley, a 1956 Nobel Prize-winning physicist, argued publicly that Black people were biologically less intelligent and used IQ to make this argument. On William F. Buckley's "Firing Line" TV show on June 10, 1974, Shockley stated, "My research leads me inescapably to the opinion that the major cause of the American Negro's intellectual and social deficits is hereditary and racially genetic in origin and, thus, not remediable to a major degree by practical improvements in the environment."²⁸ The problems in Black people and Black communities, he's saying, cannot be helped by any changes in their environment, like changes in schools or more jobs in the community. The problems of Black people, Shockley says, is their genetic inferiority seen in IQ tests.

Do you hear the racial implicit bias in this? The fast thinking? The White supremacy? Do you hear how Shockley has not considered that the IQ test he's basing much of his conclusions on may be racially biased against Black people, like all standardized tests of intelligence and language have been before then (and since)? Can you hear how he has not considered that Black social scientists

28 *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.*, episode S0145, "Shockley's Thesis," recorded on June 10, 1974, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JOIqkh2ms8&t=3116>. For a discussion of Shockley's ideas and life, see Joel Shurkin, *Broken Genius: The Rise and Fall of William Shockley, Creator of the Electronic Age* (London: Macmillan, 2006).

have not had a chance to make the IQ test or the methods used to interpret its results? Can you hear him HOWLing, assuming his view, his language, his values, his conditions as universal ones?

So blinded by the reification of IQ as something real and objective in the world that tells him something real about people's capabilities, Shockley appears to have a difficult time considering that IQ itself is flawed and White supremacist when used in the ways he does. But then, Shockley promoted eugenics. He saw a dystopian future if low IQ people were not sterilized. The difference between Shockley and Stoddard is small. The consequences of their ideas on society are large.

Around the same time, Arthur Jensen, the noted professor of educational psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, made similar claims about the genetic inferiority of African Americans.²⁹ In 1994, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray published *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. In it, they argue that many social problems like out of wedlock births, low IQ, and illiteracy were inherited, at least in part.³⁰ Many critics, such as Stephen J. Gould, Noam Chompsky, Thomas Sowell, and Joseph L. Graves, among others, criticized the book's statistical analyses and dubious findings.

My point is: White supremacist ideas and biases have not only been with us, but have always been the material by which those in power have made ideas like "intelligence" and standards of behavior or language. Tests made from such systemic biases create worlds and outcomes like this. Tests create what they purport to measure. Beware of tests and their singular, universal standards. Through their results, they are made by and make in the world the biases of their makers.

The standards of most standardized tests favor White people, so White people get higher IQs. People of color get lower IQs. These are the patterns White people create through tests White people make. These White tests and standards all have racial and other biases baked into them, only most call such standards neutral, or apolitical. Nothing when deployed in society by people is apolitical. The anxiety of the dystopian future of *Idiocracy*—the anxiety of a President Camacho—is inevitable in our world because such anxieties have always been with us. Our tests and the reifications that they create and test reflect this.

IQ scores are not simply a novelty. There are lots of other tests of so-called cognitive abilities and general intelligence used in schools, jobs, and other areas of society. The NFL, for instance, has used the Wonderlic test since the late

29 Arthur R. Jensen, "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" *Harvard Educational Review* 39, no. 1 (1969): 1–123, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.39.1.13u15956627424k7>.

30 Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

1960s.³¹ SATs, ACTs, GREs, and even GPAs, all have this same problem, which is why I could score so low on all of these tests and still be quite successful at almost every step in my education and academic career. The ability to communicate effectively and accurately in any language is not a straightforward set of skills or competencies, nor are they easily tested. When we test for it, we have to make up the thing we test for, which will inevitably contain our biases.

PROBLEM 3. LANGUAGE NEEDS MORE LANGUAGE IN ORDER TO JUDGE LANGUAGE

Even if we agree on a particular standard for English usage to be tested, there is still another thorny issue. Any language standard that a test uses is language itself. How do you describe the standard so that it can be tested properly, or understood more carefully by anyone, test takers and test makers? Standards are only as strong and useful as they are descriptive and explanatory in what they refer to. They are only as good as they allow us to agree on the same things in the same ways.

To see better the problem of language needing more language, consider clarity of expression in English. What is clear English expression? As a standard, it is not so easy to identify and explain in some precise way that a variety of people will understand and agree with. How would you describe it to others so that they would not only understand exactly what you mean, but be able to use that understanding of clear English to judge instances of language for clarity in similar ways?

Notice that we can talk about clarity of expression in English, but you don't actually know precisely what I'm speaking of. We are talking about an abstract concept, a reification, that I have not really defined. In order to do so, I have to use more language. I mean, am I talking about clarity of spoken English, or written, or both? Is it really possible to have a standard for clarity of English expression that covers both spoken and written language? They are not the same, so let's focus on written expression. This way, we can avoid having to consider things like someone's voice, or aural tone or pitch, as well as the speed of their speaking, among other features of spoken language like accent.

Okay, so we got the standard of clarity's general gist, but that's not the standard itself. It's the label for the standard. The actual standard for clarity is something more descriptive, something that makes up what we think of as a description of written language that is clear. Often, standards are lists that

31 The Wonderlic test is a test of cognitive abilities and general problem solving capacities and has been used in a number of fields; see Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, s.v. "Wonderlic test," accessed March 4, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wonderlic_test.

describe features or dimensions that can be seen or heard in the language. These dimensions of the standard reference the key attributes or features demonstrated in a text or collection of texts.

How would you describe the characteristics or features of an instance of English that might fit your definition of clarity of expression? Does it include ideas about order or organizational structures, or certain kinds of words, the length of sentences, or their variation when put together? Does it include what is stated (subject matter) and in what order ideas are offered? Does it include some logics and exclude others? What does it say about linear and chronological logics, or associative, inductive, deductive, or other logics? Likely, you might be able to answer most of these questions to your own satisfaction, but can you describe what those answers mean to others' satisfaction? Can you describe it so others can use your descriptions as a way to judge instances of language for your idea of clarity? And can they do it *consistently*—that is, would numerous readers agree with you about the degree of clarity in any given passage, according to your standard?

Take the first feature I mentioned above about order and organization. Let's assume that most of this construct, one we are calling "clarity of expression," is based on that. How would you describe that feature to someone so they could spot it in examples too, or even employ it to write something clear for you? Does my chapter fit your ideas of order as clarity? Why? How would you explain the clarity of my prose in terms of how I've ordered words, sentences, paragraphs, or organized language? Could there be other ways to order a similar discussion in words that you'd see or hear as orderly or organized? How would you account in your description for these other, perhaps unexpected, ways to order words and sentences?

Let's get even more specific and look at an example. We'll use clarity in *word choice* as our primary criterion for clarity since it seems simple and knowable. What words are clearer than others? What words are inherently unclear? Consider these four statements that attempt to express our criterion of clarity as good word choice:

1. The draft *articulates* its ideas in careful ways.
2. The draft states its ideas in careful ways.
3. The draft voices its ideas in careful ways.
4. The draft *gives* its ideas in careful ways.

You may think that all of these versions of a standard for clarity work equally well. But some readers may think the second one is clearer than the first because it uses a more common, less fancy word. It is reasonable to suspect that more readers would have an easier time with the second sentence than with the first.

We might also say that since it is three syllables shorter, it is clearer, so a good example of what it describes. Brevity equals clarity.

But do the two words “articulates” and “states” mean the same thing, and are both equally close enough to the intended meaning of the sentence? Both mean to express or say something explicitly, but “articulate” has an additional meaning: to form a joint. It also refers to a place where two or more sections of something are connected and flex.

In Great Britain, what some in the US call semi-trucks or semis, they call “articulated lorries” because there are two sections, a back trailer with wheels and a front cab or lorry, which are connected and articulate, or flex. So if one was wanting this nuance or meaning to the above idea, then the first statement is clearer if clarity means a fullness, or accuracy, or even precision in meaning. That is, if the standard for clarity is not just stating an idea carefully in a draft, but leaving flexible ways to understand or interpret key ideas connected carefully together, then the first is more accurate and precise, since it includes more of the intended meaning.

One might argue, then, that the first sentence is therefore clearer in these ways than the second sentence. The word “states” is not clear enough about the flex in ideas in the draft. The second statement is just more accessible to more people. I could make a similar case for the embodied dimensions of “voices” in sentence three, or the associations with gifting and exchanging things with other people that I hear in sentence four, but you get the idea.

I go through these examples in detail because what I want to demonstrate is two things. First, our assumptions about something so seemingly obvious as clarity is not so easily defined, agreed upon, and captured for others to understand, use, or apply in their own language and judgement practices. It is hard to explain standards so that they work for most people in the same ways. In fact, I’d argue it’s pretty much impossible. When it comes to standards in language use, we just work from the assumption that we can have this kind of near universal agreement, even though we don’t and we never have.

Second, the language of standards is inherently shifty and ambiguous. The meaning in the descriptions of standards, in the words themselves, floats. Words can only mean what we want them to mean, or what our conditions in life that created our literacies afford those words to mean to us. So when we have language about other language, as in standards, we compound this slipperiness of exact or precise meaning. We might agree generally about the goodness or necessity of “clarity,” but we will never fully agree about what exactly that looks, sounds, and feels like, or how well clarity is achieved exactly in any given expression of language.

In order to judge language with a standard, you have to have still other language to do that judging. Not only do you need language that describes

the standard of language, but language that judges some other instance of language. It's taken me many paragraphs to explain a seemingly simple standard of language that most would agree with, clarity of expression. And I've not covered a number of obvious dimensions in this kind of standard. The trouble with standards is that they are words about words that necessitate more words in order to use them. And all these words are shifty and articulate, flex, depending on who is using them and reading them, and where and when those words circulate.

Stepping back from these three problems, I wonder about the consequences of White language supremacy in the testing of language more broadly in society. I have certainly felt the consequences. Here's what we know. Elite, White, male groups of people have had the most power to decide language standards. Tests created by elite White male groups themselves create the standards those tests allegedly measure. We need additional language to do any measuring of language apart from the language of any standard. This additional language has been controlled exclusively by the habits of language and judgement of elite, White, male groups. Our language and judgements reveal how much our ideas about language float and are inherently ambiguous. And these facts create an overdetermined set of overlapping systems of language, schooling, testing, and judgement that create our ideas of intelligence and ability, which are implicitly and historically associated with race.

THE COIK OF WHITE LANGUAGE SUPREMACY

Part of the problem with standards of English language is that in common conversations, we use the language of standards, or rather we invoke it, but we are not being precise. We aren't referring to the same things. You receive an email or letter. You judge it as bad or unprofessional because it is "unclear"—that is, it is unclear to you, but it was clear enough to the writer; otherwise, they would not have written and sent it. No one writes or speaks in order not to be understood. But what exactly do you think you see, or not see, in front of you in the email? This is what we often skip when we reference our own standards. We just jump to the judgement. We don't realize that if we didn't jump, what we jumped over, our reasons and evidence for our judgement, may be something else. That is, we shouldn't jump to judgements so quickly.

This may happen because most standards for English language already *seem to* make sense to us. However, as we've learned, this fast thinking is dangerous and too often racist. This racism comes from only having one language group forming standards, and only having our own singular perspective (no matter who we are) to judge from, and not realizing or admitting that we all are using only our singular

perspective to judge language by a standard that comes from a White, elite group of language users. Lots of mind bugs can occur in this situation.

Ask yourself: Do I think I'm a good writer? Can I write something, give it to another person without qualifying or justifying how bad the writing is, or how I wanted to spend more time on this part or that part, or how I know the opening needs some work? These insecurities about our languaging tell us that we don't even match up to our own standards. Why do you suppose we are all so insecure about our language use? Could it be because most of us do not share the same material relations to language as those who control the standards we've been taught in school and other places? Could it be that this condition in our lives makes most of us feel like we are not good language users, and therefore not very intelligent? Have you ever not given someone some of your writing, or not written an email to someone because you didn't want them to judge you as not very smart, as a bad communicator? I have had relatives who told me that they refuse to email me because they are worried that I'll think they aren't smart because of their alleged bad writing.

When we jump to our judgements about language, this can keep us from reflecting on our own unspoken standards of language and what they reproduce when we circulate them. This can make each of us unconscious reproducers of racism and White language supremacy, no matter who we are or where we come from. In other words, it is one thing to say that an email is unclear *to me*. It is another thing, perhaps a racist thing, to say an email is objectively unclear, then make another decision from that judgement, such as not give an applicant a job or turn down an opportunity for that person that you hold the power to bestow.

The second judgement assumes that the language practices of the email are *inherently* unclear, that the language itself is unclear language, and this judgement is linked to our notions of intelligence, which have always been associated with race and class. We transfer this unclear language onto the person, saying that the person is an unclear communicator and so not fit for this opportunity. But that language is not the only thing that makes it unclear to you. It is also your reading of the language, your experience of the email that creates the email as unclear. So why are we blaming that other person? What we might notice first is that they use language differently from us.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be able to identify when we don't understand a bit of language, or when we don't find someone's argument compelling. I'm saying that our not finding an argument compelling is more complicated than saying that the communicator is not good at communicating, and that the reasons for this often have to do with the racial politics of language and how we use them to judge instances of language around us. We need to slow down our thinking, realize that we all are implicated in White language supremacy.

Most of the time, we operate from a simple test: Is the language in front of me clear to me or compelling (choose your standard)? If yes, then okay, it is clear language or a compelling argument. If not, then it is unclear or unconvincing. When I was a technical writer for companies like Hewlett-Packard, Mitsubishi Silicon, and NASA, the rule or logic for this kind of test was called COIK—“clear only if known.” If you know what a compound sentence and a relative clause are, then when I ask you to get rid of your compound sentences and convert them to sentences with more relative clauses in them, you’ll likely know what to do. The instruction or feedback I’ve given you is clear because you know the terms already. But if you don’t understand those two terms and how they apply to sentences, then what I asked of you is unclear.

Another way to define COIK is to think of it as the logic of I’ll-know-it-when-I-see-it. For instance, COIK operates in the HOWLING that Strunk and White use to describe the different “languors” of Hemmingway and Faulkner back in chapter 3. As they themselves explain: “Anyone acquainted with Faulkner or Hemingway will have recognized them in these passages and perceived which was which. How different are their languors!”³² COIK logic is why my reading of their style guide was so difficult to do in college.

In my previous email example, the communication is unclear or unconvincing because, well, I don’t understand it, or I don’t like the argument or evidence used. But my rationalizing of why I don’t find it clear or convincing—that is, the deep structures of my thinking, my habits of language that afford me meaning in this instance—is not really identified. That is, we often, when pressed, will simply restate our opinion, not offer evidence for that opinion. This suggests that we don’t usually think in terms of evidence for our claims and judgements, particularly our judgements of language. Psychologists have researched this phenomenon and found most study participants only offered explanations for their positions, not actual evidence, even when pressed.³³

The key here is that *I* don’t understand the email—that *I*, the person reading the email, don’t like the argument. My judgement is more about me and how I’m using my linguistic and other biases and assumptions than about the person who wrote the email. I’m sure we’ve all had an exchange like this one:

“This is such a great book,” Karen says.

“Why is that a good book?” Jose asks.

“I don’t know, I just like it. The book is clear and forceful,” says Karen.

32 Strunk Jr. and White, *Elements*, 68.

33 Deanna Kuhn, *The Skills of Argument* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

It's clear to Karen why she likes the book, but likely not to Jose, at least not in any precise way. Does he know what "clear and forceful" looks or sounds like to Karen? No. She hasn't offered that. But much like my discussion of clarity in the previous section, this kind of an exchange can seem like some standard has been communicated, but it really hasn't. Remember, words float, and such standards require more floating words to help others make precise sense of them.

Clear and forceful are ideas that float around, meaning whatever Jose wants and whatever Karen wants. It's COIK. The habit of language, if we are not careful, turns into the Southern language strategy. COIK language explanations and standards are fine in many everyday situations, but once rewards, opportunities, and punishments get attached to our judgements of language and people, then our own private standards become racist because of where they come from in history, culture, and society. In those important places like schools, law firms, governments, and the like, we should be asking: What do our language conditions, which generate and circulate our standards, afford us to judge in any given instance of language?

I'm not saying, however, that some people are not as smart or language savvy as others. I'm not saying that White people are better and smarter with words than, say, Black people in the US. I'm saying that in our historically segregated society, racial groups and the languages that follow those groups have different material conditions. Those conditions create different English languages with different habits and norms. Each version of English has its rich and potent ways of understanding, thinking, and being in the world. They are not always compatible or transferable.

Knowing Black English may not help you learn White English, and vice versa. In fact, Black English often presents markers in your language that teachers and employers may judge harshly, or translate negatively through other racial implicit biases, as well as through mind bugs like the halo effect. They may hear a version of *Idiocracy* in your Black English, or Spanish-inflected English, or Chinese accent (heard by them). We often fall back on COIK ways of justifying our language judgements. Most of our mind bugs are not caught. The racial language biases go undetected. And White language supremacy is affirmed as neutral, as universal language practice, as proper English.