

FOREWORD

Thoughts upon reading *Above the Well*.

Wake up in the middle of the night. A bathroom run. Don't turn on the lights, stub a toe against one of the bed's legs, bump a shoulder against the door jam, even though the doorway is four-foot wide and I'm not.

I've got stereoscopic vision, yet I'm not always conscious of using this gift. And I bang up against the edge of the door.

And then there's the light switch.

Forget about why I didn't turn on the light. Might have been a good reason (not wanting to disturb my mate in the middle of the night). Here, I'm thinking about how that light switch came to be.



We've been told about Benjamin Franklin and a key and a kite, harnessing electric power (and leading to the lightning rod). And we've been told about Thomas Edison and the electric lightbulb. And there were others, of course (but of course, we mainly learn of the Americans). But consider the conversations that led to General Electric, the first electric company. It took folks we would think of as scientists and engineers and manufacturers agreeing to work together, to be convinced, to cooperate. And it would take convincing a wealthy man, J.P. Morgan, to invest in the making of General Electric.

What I'm getting at with all of this is that we have a biological predisposition for language, the gift of language, maybe greater than the gift of stereoscopic vision, since no other creature uses language the way we humans do, but we're not always conscious of our uses of language. When we do become conscious of those language abilities we enter the world of rhetoric. Without our ability to cooperate through the negotiations made possible by the conscious use of language, by rhetoric, none of the great wonders of the world, the wonders of architecture, science, technology—none of it—would be possible. It all begins by our working together through language.

But in saying that, there is the presumption of cooperation. Yet "cooperate" is a tricky word, because it assumes equal power. Neither Edison nor his friend Henry Ford despite their abilities to create and to convince others of the value of their creations still needed the power of money. They had to sell their ideas to those of great wealth. And less recognized would be the women and the folks of color who helped to produce the lightbulb, motion pictures, the auto industry's assembly line.

What Dr. Inoue provides is some ways to think about rhetoric and power and the languages that come into play in the creation of workable rhetorics. His is not a linguistic study, it is a rich rhetorical study.



Another thought.

There was a time when Martin Joos's *The Five Clocks* (1967) was commonly read as an introduction to linguistics and as a discussion on "usage" (the ways language is used by native speakers of that language). Using the metaphor of clocks, he places the "norm" in English as "Central Standard Time," and he questions it. He writes,

English-usage guilt-feelings have not yet been noticeably eased by the work of linguistic scientists, parallel to the work done by the psychiatrists. It is still our custom unhesitatingly and unthinkingly to demand that the clocks of language all be set to Central Standard Time. And each normal American is taught thoroughly, if not to keep accurate time, at least to feel ashamed whenever he notices that a clock of his is out of step with the English Department's tower-clock. Naturally, he avoids longing aloft when he can. Then his linguistic guilt hides deep in subconscious mind there secretly gnaws away at the underpinnings of his public personality. . . . [I]n his social life he is still in uneasy bondage to the gospel according to Webster as expounded by Miss Fidditch [the English teacher]. (4)

That was written in the nineteen sixties. Dialects and racism don't enter into his writing. He is busy saying that there's nothing natural about the language of power. So that since Joos, we have espoused the viability of various dialects and have argued the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (*College Composition and Communication*, vol. 25 Special Issue, 1974). Yet that gnawing away of "correctness" lingers—maybe even especially among students of color and the bilingual (more than the polylingual) attempting college. And the good-hearted tutors at the writing center reinforce the mentality, even if kindly, and the good professor, wanting his and her students to succeed will reinforce it, even as speaking of dialects and the like. We recognize that standing before a wave with our hand up yelling "Stop!" cannot stem the tide of standardized conventions. We can't help but recognize the power at play. Inoue recognizes that if there is power, that power cannot help but be racialized. It's not simply the conventions of a disassociated dialect of prestige, but that prestige and power belongs to a

certain class and its racial power. Not just a standard, but a symbolic imposition of what he calls a “white language supremacy.”

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Dr. Fidditch—two instances.

A graduate student and teacher, a woman of color, emails. A student had asked if the southern dialect is also an instance of white language supremacy. I respond:

The answer to your student (great question!) is yes and no. No. The regional dialect of the South and even the southern Midwest (which is different) and the Southwest (especially Texas) are not the prestige dialect (which is how linguists have described it for years). And historically, the dialect of the southeast came from Black folks (who raised the wealthy white folks as “mammies” and “aunties” and “uncles”). And those Black folks got their dialect from a mix of their native tongues, mixed with the lingua franca of slave trade, West African English Pidgin, and the “accent” of the task masters (not the Masters who lived in the Big House, but the guy who was like a foreman in a factory, the guy with the whip). The task masters were Irish (when they were still considered racially inferior though above the Black slaves). BUT since regionally there is a middle-class white southern dialect, it becomes a localized white language of supremacy. We’ve had presidents with a Texas accent (Johnson) or a Southern accent (Carter), so the power is the power even if the northerners wouldn’t recognize their dialects as the dialect of white language supremacy. See? . . . I prefer Standardized American English—not “standard,” which is the linguistic term for the oral, but since it’s a social construct, standardized. Now, one last complication. There is no southern accent in written discourse. If it weren’t for a few words (like *colour* or *honour* or referring to a *lorry* instead of a truck), we wouldn’t know a southerner from a northerner or a Canadian or a Brit or an Australian from an American. So in written discourse, what linguists call Edited American English, the written “standard,” there sure is a discourse of power (which is what Asao is getting at). But even that gets messy. EAE doesn’t have to be academic discourse. Asao is using that language. I use that

language. So do you—and we ain't white. But we recognize the power in the prestige dialect.

So—yes, in the south, the white southern dialect would be a “language” of white supremacy (you know, the language is English, more a matter of Imperialism). But outside of the south, no, not really (northerners and midwesterners and westerners denigrate the dialect). But in writing there is no “southern dialect.” There's only the standardized and its conventions, which have been imposed by those in power—white folks. That help?

I got pedantic. Couldn't help it somehow. The thing is, what Asao provides and demonstrates and discusses isn't really a matter of linguistics. It's a matter of power. It's a rhetoric—it's the stories of accommodating and of resisting the rhetoric of power, white language supremacy.

Example two.

I read Asao's manuscript—more than once. I had a habit—each time and over many years—of pointing to his spelling: *judgement*. As you will read in what follows, Asao talks back. He has his logic. It makes sense. And after all, the British *standardisation* (with an -s rather than a -z) does spell it as *judgement*.

But here's where bilingualism (even as what is known as a “heritage speaker,” someone able to hear with a ready bilingualism but feels anxiety in speaking the first language, which is my case) comes into play as the “gnawing away of ‘correctness’.”

Our writing system (and I mean the alphabetic system) is based on the oral. It's what is termed a *phoneme-grapheme* correspondence. The sound effects the graphic, the writing. Now, in English the correspondence sometimes falls apart because of English's long written history, so that *knight* is pronounced *nite* rather than its original kuh-nikt. The first sounds that met my ears were Spanish, but the first writing I did was in English, when I entered school. I had to learn the sounds of English (a New York and Black English until I was sixteen and very consciously learned Central Standard Time). I learned the sounds and was taught spelling using phonics. The phoneme-grapheme correspondence was rigid for me. Since I knew that the spoken dropped the final -r (in New York), I would write that a thought was an *idear* (which when I was twelve, the president of the U.S. would say too, John F. Kennedy's Boston dialect). Even when it came to the language of the streets, I would not hear *gonna* (the written convention for

going to) but *gone* (“I gone tell ya *what!*” when pushing back against a challenge). I was in my twenties when I discovered (or, more precisely, was mockingly told) that the brow was not pronounced for-eh-head. So I cannot see *judgement* and not say in my head judg-eh-ment. I still subvocalize as I read. And that is *my* problem, a problem with usage from which Asao breaks free. He owns his language, does not kowtow.

Because of the imperative to learn English, imposed by my parents (who gave me the duty of teaching them English), imposed by the school (Sister Fid-ditch), and imposed by society, I am compelled by the need for a kind of precision. I remain subject to “English-usage guilt-feelings.” Asao, throughout the book, and in the example of this one word, *judgement*, breaks free of any guilt, and in so doing allows us all to break free.

I have to be very conscious to resist white language supremacy, to the degree that that’s possible, more so than Dr. Inoue, apparently. I very rarely turn to dialect in my writing. My youth was Spanish and Spanglish and what linguist Ana Celia Zentella calls Puerto Rican Black English. But if TV can be a guide (and I think it can in this case), that dialect sounds very different now, nearly sixty years later. I fear I’d sound like someone mimicking a dialect that I no longer own. But I can and do turn to the rhetoric of my upbringing and my ancestry. In the language of rhetoric, as Asao will explain, I employ the rhetoric of the Sophists more than Aristotle. The language might be the language of the power of those in power, but my use of it pushes back against that power. And that is true of Asao’s writing.

All this brings us back to what we will discover and learn as we enter this work by Asao Inoue. His history is not mine. We might both be what Asao calls *languagelings*, but we arrived at our ways with words differently, even with different commonalities, given differences in time and place and “color.” His is the history of the working class, the history of an American of color, a mixed-race Asian American. And just like even an octaroon (someone one-eighth Black) remains Black or a “high yella” or a “redbone,” what is clear to those who come in contact with Asao is that he is not white, confused, as he tells us, with a Latino. Even as he is a champion reader in elementary school, he is a champion reader who is nevertheless regarded as having a language deficiency. What folks see affects what they hear. We will learn of the ways in which racism is never not tied to language, its use, its power—even when the power is on his side, as in the “language” he shares with his twin brother Tad (who sounds so much like Asao, even down to Asao’s linguistic idiosyncrasies, that it’s uncanny). “Twin Language” still becomes subject to white language supremacy. We travel with

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Asao through grade school, the southwest, the Pacific Northwest, colleges, the Midwest and the ways in which racism is always vying for power and must be challenged. Autobiography, theory, teaching, philosophy, theology—all are beautifully interwoven. And always there is power.

Enjoy the journey in the pages ahead. And with Asao Inoue consider how we might assume our own power.

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